

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

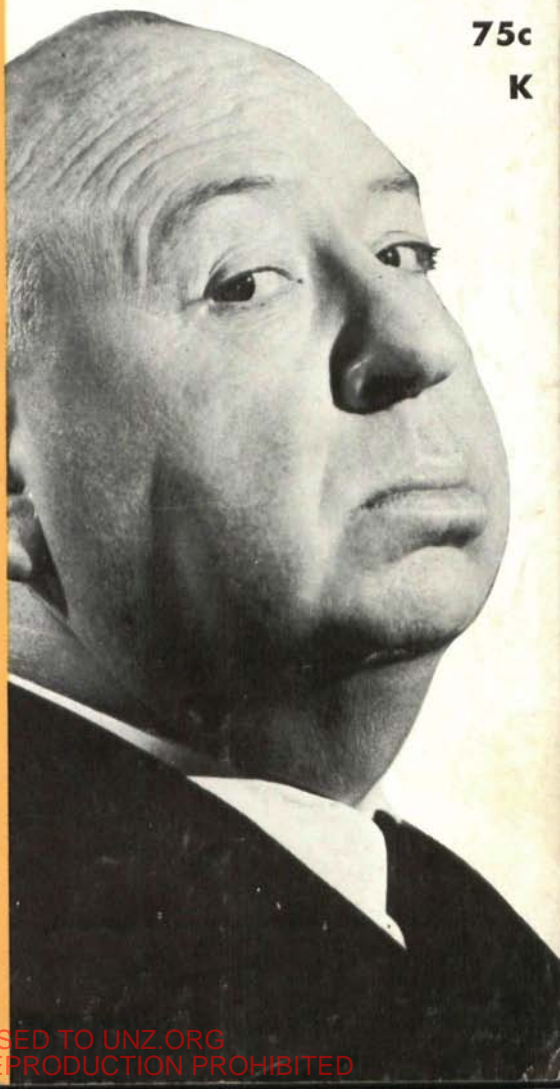
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presented by
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of **SUSPENSE**



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April 1976

Dear Reader:

Whatever could the poet have meant when he said, "April is the cruelest month. . ."? I think it is a perfectly splendid month, and so will you when you find out what I've arranged for you.

There's *Accidental Widow*, a story by Nedra Tyre in which husbands meet their fate in delightfully creative ways. And there is the charming couple in Carroll Mayers' *Blackmail for Two* who prove the old adage that the family that preys together stays together.

Things could not end more rousinglly for the hero of Jack Ritchie's novelette, *Next in Line*. Pity so many relatives had to be accounted for first. . .

So you see, there's absolutely no cruelty in *my* April. Oh, well, maybe the poet got out of bed on the wrong side that day.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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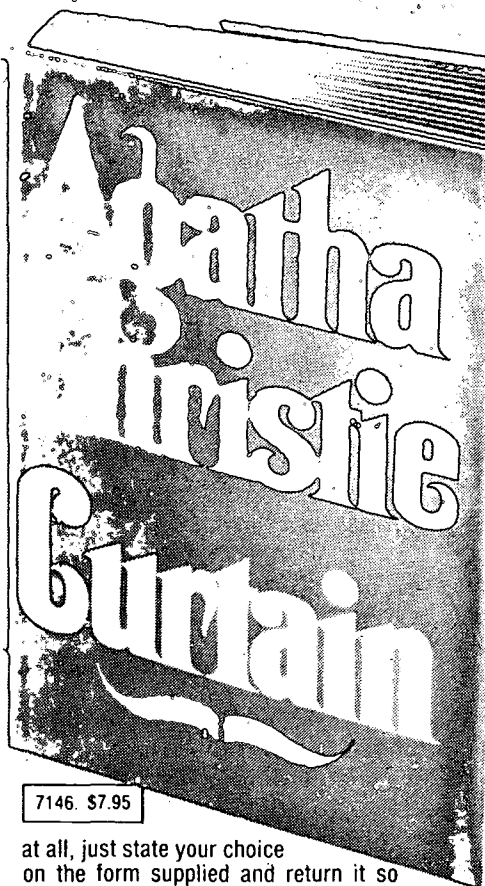
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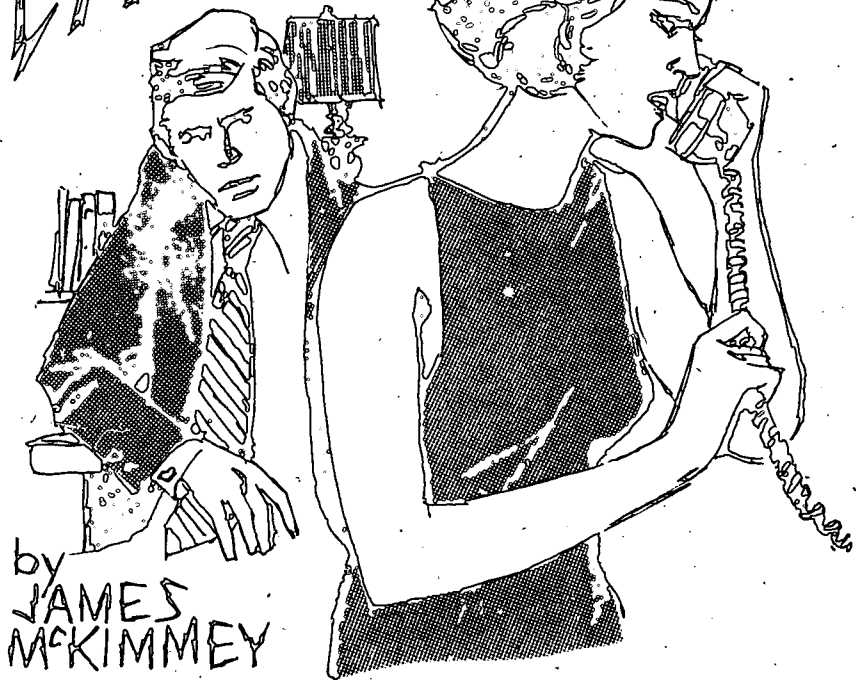
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"Do you know me?" she asked, controlling her voice. . .

THE CALLER



by
**JAMES
MCKIMNEY**

In his bed, Dr. Brian Morrow heard the ringing of the telephone from the sleepy edges of dim awareness. He tried to shut out the intrusion on the little sleep he'd been able to manage, but the ringing persisted. He started to reach for the phone beside the bed, then realized, as he came more firmly awake, that it was not the bedroom telephone sounding, but the one in the adjoining study, with the unlisted number he gave only to intimates.

He sat up and swung his legs out of bed, a quick, athletic man in his late twenties who'd already proven his capabilities as a surgeon. He moved to the next room, pushing longish well-cut hair from his face.

He lifted the telephone. "Yes?"

A familiar feminine voice replied, "Hello, Brian."

He sat down at his desk in the book-lined room, feeling a pulsation of excitement. "Cathi?" It was a question but he knew it was most certainly dark-haired Cathi Wolfe, who had reappeared into his life just two weeks ago when she'd come back to Elyria, Ohio, from San Francisco to visit her hospitalized mother. He hadn't seen her for years, not since shortly after she, Brian and Teddy Wolfe had graduated from Elyria High School. He had met her in a hospital corridor and recognized her immediately. What he had once felt about her, before she'd married Teddy and gone off with him to an Air Force base, had come back with a rush.

"I'm sorry, Brian," she said. "I must have awakened you. It's one in the morning here, and I just didn't think, until I'd dialed, that it would be four there."

"Is something wrong, Cathi?" He waited for her to reply, thinking of all the hours they'd spent together during the visit, dining, walking, talking. He certainly hadn't rejoiced in the fact that Teddy Wolfe, her husband, was no longer in this life—he'd been shot down in a B-52 in the last active stages of the Vietnam War but the attraction he'd felt for her in earlier years still existed.

"It started the day before yesterday," she said. "Someone called. He had a strange voice. High and whispery. I could hear a definite Oriental accent in it. He said that something very important was going to happen to me."

"What, Cathi?"

"He wouldn't explain. He just . . . quoted the inscription on the inside of the wedding band Teddy gave me. I . . ."

He could hear the tension in her voice, and wished she were closer than San Francisco. He planned to see her soon at a medical convention there, but until then they were twenty-five-hundred miles apart. "How did he know the inscription?" he asked.

"I don't know. Teddy had the same one on his band. I removed my ring after Teddy was shipped home and I put it in a lockbox—I never told anyone what was inscribed. But Teddy's ring wasn't in his effects

when his body was sent back. Maybe someone took it in Asia. Because. . . .”

“Go on, Cathi.”

“Because today I got a package in the mail. It had his ring in it.”

“And that’s everything that’s happened since you got the call?”

“Yes. But I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I mean, it brought back all the memories of losing Teddy. And I’ve tried so hard to swim above that. Until now I thought I had. I’ve been sitting in this apartment all today, not understanding what’s happening or why. And I had to talk to someone. To you, Brian.”

He was fully awake now, well-conditioned to little sleep between regular duties and emergencies. “I’m glad you did.” He considered swiftly, making the kind of fast and positive decision he was constantly required to make in his work. “I don’t like it, Cathi. I wasn’t going to take off for the convention for another week but I’ll leave as soon as I can make arrangements at the hospital and get on a plane. I should be there this afternoon.”

“But, Brian—”

“It’s O.K. My associate will take over for me. Don’t argue, Cathi. You won’t win.”

“I won’t then. If you can, Brian—if you will, please do come.”

The jet came down in late afternoon through autumn air into San Francisco International. Once off the plane, he rented a car. He knew the city from a previous visit and knew his way into San Francisco. There, he ramped off and headed for Cathi’s neighborhood. Moments later she was in his arms, graceful and slim and fragrant. He held her for a time, then she whispered, “I’m so glad you came, Brian. He called again. . . .”

She moved away from him and motioned to one of the fragile chairs in the carefully decorated room that reflected her. (She was strong-minded—he’d learned that growing up with her—and self-possessed.)

They sat and she told him the latest message.

The caller had instructed her to meet him in a bar in the lower Mission District, that night at seven o’clock. He’d given her the name and address and warned her to arrive alone. She’d asked how she would know him and he had replied that he knew what she looked like and would make the move after she arrived.

Brian sat studying the possibilities.

"I don't know what's happening, Brian," she said.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I don't either. What do *you* think you should do, Cathi?"

"Go there. Meet him. I have to. Because I have to know what's going on. I can take a cab, and—"

"I've got a car. I'll drive you there."

"He said alone."

"I know, but I'll drop you near there." He frowned. "I don't want you walking in there by yourself. But if that's what he said. . ."

At five minutes to seven, after he'd rented a room in a motel not far from her apartment and picked her up, he stopped the rented car a short distance from the Mission bar, in near darkness. The neighborhood was aging and grubby. He took her hand and held it for a few seconds. "I really don't want you going in there."

"I have to."

"Be careful. And get back here fast if anything seems really freaky."

She nodded, moved to press a cheek against his, then got out swiftly with resolution, and moved up the sidewalk. He watched her walk away. "Be careful," he repeated, whispering. "Be careful."

She paused at the entrance, then moved inside. There were a half dozen men seated at the bar, all of whom turned to examine her. She moved past them in silence, looking back at them. All wore work clothing. The one nearest her had the face of a boxer. The others were nearly as tough-looking. One at the far end of the bar, sitting apart from the others, had a plastic, stretched-tight look, very white and masklike. He sat with a hand propping his face, staring at her steadily.

She hurried to one of the empty booths and sat down, no longer looking at them, feeling her heart beating.

She waited, not knowing what for, then the man with the fighter's face got up and walked over to her. He sat down and smiled, revealing the fact that two lower front teeth were missing.

"You're a good-looking broad," he said.

She was silent, then she said, "What do you want?"

The man smiled again. "One guess."

"Do you know me?" she asked, controlling her voice.

"That's what I've got in mind."

She shook her head. "Did you ask me to come here tonight?"

The man looked confused.

"Did you?"

"Just so you're here." He reached out.

She leaned back; her hands going out of his reach under the table.

"You didn't, did you?"

"What's the difference?"

She got up and hurried out. Returning down the street, looking back, seeing that she wasn't being followed, she got back into Brian's car.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed. "Let's get out of here."

She described to him, on the way to her apartment, the bar and what had happened there. Back at the apartment, he said, "You're positive he wasn't the caller—the fighter type?"

"Yes," she said. "His voice was so low and husky."

"He could change that."

"Yes, but I'm certain he knew nothing about telling me to be there—he seemed confused when I asked him about it. I think he was just trying for an easy pickup and that's all. Maybe I should have stayed longer."

"No," he said. "You did the right thing." He rubbed a hand over his eyes, feeling a building fatigue. His schedule had been demanding the last few days.

"You're tired, Brian," she said. "You've got to get some sleep."

"I don't want to leave you."

"I'll be fine. I haven't been threatened, have I? We just don't know what it's all about. Go back to the motel and get some sleep. Please. I have four more days of vacation. Come back in the morning and I'll fix breakfast."

He nodded, giving in to the fatigue. "You'll know where I am, Cathi."

"Yes," she said. "And I'm glad you're here, so close."

Her telephone was on an antique desk in a corner near a window. She sat alone in the apartment, looking at it, finding herself waiting, waiting.

Then she suddenly got up and went into the compact kitchen, forc-

ing her mind away from the constant expectation of the ringing telephone and the high, whispery voice. She checked her breakfast supplies, then realized, with dismay, that she had no eggs.

She looked at her watch—there was a small grocery only two blocks away that would still be open. If Brian arrived early, she wanted to be ready for him—and she would *not* be locked to this apartment! It was true, as she'd told Brian: she hadn't been threatened.

She hurried to the store and was halfway back, passing an alley, when a hooded figure came out of the alley. She started to run, but he caught her from behind and stopped her. She began to scream, but it was muffled by his palm across her mouth. "Don't do that," he said as he pulled her back into the alley from where he had come.

It was the Oriental voice of the caller.

His hand moved away from her mouth as he held her, still locked.

"What do you *want*?" she whispered.

"Why didn't you come to the bar?"

"I did! Just as you told me to!"

He laughed, a high, sinister laugh. "Oh, yes, you did, didn't you? And I saw you there, didn't I? With all your soft and lovely beauty. Yes?"

She could feel him nibbling at the back of her neck. Then he turned her around. He'd pushed back the hood. In the dim light, feeling her throat tightening, she saw the face—the white, masklike face—of the man who had sat at the far end of the bar.

"Oh, yes, so lovely," he whispered. He laughed again. Then he said, "Now—please listen carefully. You will inform no one of any of this. Do you understand? Or it will be very costly for you. Perhaps. . . your life."

He released her and disappeared down the alley.

When she got home, she made certain her night lock was on, with the chain across as well. She sat down, still feeling her blood pumping. She looked at the telephone. He'd told her to inform no one, but she already had: Brian. She checked her watch. He had had only a few hours' sleep, but. . .

She got up and dialed the number of his motel.

He arrived in minutes, looking rumpled, saying, "Tell me." He sat down on the sofa across from her.

She told him.

He shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Any of it."

"Not yet."

"This time he threatened you."

"Yes," she said.

"You were to tell no one, but you've told me. That might be enough for him to make that threat a reality. If he's seen me coming in here."

"But he doesn't know for sure I've told you."

"Just the same, I'm not leaving you alone here again tonight."

"I don't want you to."

In the morning he awoke smelling the aroma of bacon. He sat up, removing the blanket she had put over him. He felt rested and realized it was already midmorning.

"Awake," she said, coming in from the kitchen.

"And alert," he said, grinning.

Then the telephone rang.

She stood motionless. Finally she lifted the receiver. "Hello," she said, and listened.

He leaned forward tensely.

"I will," she said.

She hung up and turned toward him.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"I'm to buy this morning's *Chronicle*. I'm to read the personal ads."

"Where do I buy one?"

"There's a box on the nearest corner."

He left and returned with the paper. Together they found the ad. It read: "Cathi Wolfe, go to the Driftwood Restaurant on Noe Street this afternoon at 1:30, alone."

"But still no clues about what all of this is," Brian said.

"Maybe I'll find some this afternoon," she said grimly.

"You're going?"

"Yes."

"We'll do it the same way we did last night. I'll stay parked close by."

At 1:25 he parked around the block from the specified address. She went on to the restaurant alone, on foot. It was a neat, small establishment, uncrowded at this time of day. A hostess seated her at a

table and she ordered coffee, then waited, feeling the return of apprehension as she watched for the appearance of the man with the masklike face.

The next person to arrive was a well-shaped blonde, dressed a little cheaply, but attractive just the same. She looked across the room, found Cathi as the hostess approached, and seconds later she was seated at Cathi's table.

"I'm Delle Black, Mrs. Wolfe," she said in a husky voice. "I'm an actress. Presently at liberty." There was a tone of bitterness.

"Did you put the ad in the *Chronicle* instructing me to come here?"

"No. But I saw it this morning."

"How do you know me?"

The blonde waved off an approaching waitress and said, "I knew your husband, Teddy."

Cathi frowned.

"Before he left on his Asian tour," the other woman went on. "That was a long time ago. And I've never known what happened to him. He didn't write me. He never phoned. When I saw your name in the newspaper I decided to come here and find out—he showed me your picture so I was sure I'd know you. I'm looking at your expression. Something went wrong for him, didn't it? I guess somehow I knew it. That's why I've been afraid to inquire of the Air Force. What happened?"

"He was killed over North Vietnam," Cathi said in a cold voice.

She watched the girl, who seemed shaken and near tears. Then finally she got control. "I was in love with him. He was in love with me."

Cathi shook her head slowly. "I don't believe that."

"We had an affair before he left." The girl looked at Cathi with eyes reflecting growing anger.

Cathi, feeling bitter dismay, remembered the weeks when Teddy had left the base near Sacramento to visit San Francisco on an unknown errand. She'd never questioned him. Even though she'd known his youthful days to have been wild, she'd had total trust in him. Now...

"He was in love with me," the girl repeated. "Not with you. He was bored with you. He promised he was going to divorce you and marry me when he got back. But he didn't get back, did he? My lousy luck as

usual. So *you* got it."

"Got what?"

"His insurance. All one hundred thousand of it! So what have you done with all that money? How many fur coats? How much jewelry? How many cars?"

Cathi was silent for a time, then she said honestly, "I haven't done anything but put it in banks. I had some savings before I got it. I found a good job. I—" Then she stopped, asking herself why she was telling this to a stranger.

"But it's there, isn't it?" the girl said accusingly. "You can go get a chunk of it any time you feel like it. And I've got nothing, not even a job!" The girl's mouth twisted in an ugly grimace, then she suddenly got up and left the restaurant.

Cathi sat a few moments longer, then she returned to Brian.

He helped her into the car and said, "Was he there?"

"No," she said. "I talked to a girl. . . ." She described the encounter as he drove back to her apartment. "I still don't understand anything. Not a thing. He may not have come in because the girl was at my table. . . . He did say alone. . . ."

Brian took her hand. "Cathi, listen. You need some relief from all this. Let's have a sensational dinner somewhere, a real evening on the town."

"Yes," she agreed. "Let's please do that."

They rose in an outside glass elevator to the top of a downtown hotel for cocktails. When they were seated, Brian deliberately avoided referring to anything that had happened to her. Instead, he smiled at her presence across from him as fog drifted in fragments in the waning light beyond.

Over a second drink, she said, "I just can't forget it, Brian. That evil man or the girl today. Telling me that Teddy—"

"Hush," he said.

"We both grew up with him. I married him."

"You don't ever truly know anyone else, not really. You think you do, but you don't."

She gazed out at the city slowly turning to dusk, lights going on in the surrounding buildings. "What's behind all of this, Brian? What is it?"

"I've got one notion, anyway—the insurance money."

"But—" She shook her head.

"Whoever is behind this—the caller—could have met Teddy before he died. Teddy may have told him about that insurance, may even have told him that you'd be careful about that much money, that you wouldn't just throw it away foolishly if anything happened to him. Teddy had leave over there, didn't he?"

"He wrote about leaves in Saigon and Bangkok, yes."

"Well, then—"

"But I don't see where it's going."

"I've heard that Oriental logic is confusing to Occidentals. Cathi, we came here to relax, remember? Let's just take this interval for ourselves, nothing else."

"All right," she said softly, her eyes shining at him. "Yes."

The telephone was ringing when they returned to her apartment.

"I can," he said, motioning toward the instrument.

"No," she said, and walked over to answer it.

The now-familiar voice said, "Who was the man who walked into your building with you just now?"

She paused. "A friend. From my hometown."

"His name?"

She palmed the receiver and said to Brian, "He wants your name."

Brian nodded.

She moved her hand away and said, "His name is Brian Morrow."

"Does he know about me?"

"He has from the beginning. But he's the only one. And he hasn't told anyone else."

"That had better be true. And I can check on him, you know. If he's a policeman, I mean."

"He's not. And I haven't called the police."

"Make sure you don't. And the girl in the restaurant, who is she?"

"Someone who read the ad. She recognized my name. She knew my husband. She wanted to know what had happened to him."

"Her name?"

She took a breath. "Delle Black."

"She could be with the police, too, couldn't she?"

"I haven't talked to the police—you'll have to believe me."

"I can check on her as well. You'd better have been telling me the truth."

The connection was broken. She put down the telephone and moved to join Brian on the sofa. "Brian. . ."

An hour later the telephone rang again.

Brian hurried to answer it, then turned to Cathi. "It's Delle Black. She sounds upset."

Cathi took the receiver from him and listened to Delle Black, speaking through tears and terror. "A man, with a horrid face! He—"

"Yes—I know who you mean—"

"He said he got my name from you, then found my address in the phone book and came here. He made me tell him what we'd talked about in the restaurant. Then he warned me not to go to the authorities. He. . . beat me to make sure I understood! *Who is he? What does he want?*"

"I don't know," Cathi said. "He keeps calling. I've seen him twice. He put that ad in the paper. But I don't know any more than you do."

"Have you told the police about him?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"I'm not sure."

"I have no love for you, do you hear me? None! But I wouldn't call the police if I were you. He hasn't hurt *you* physically yet, but he has me!" The girl hung up.

"He found her," Cathi said. "He beat her."

"The caller?"

She nodded.

"He's dangerous. I think it's time for the police to know, Cathi, no matter if—"

"I can't." She sat down.

"But—"

She shook her head. "My head—I'm so confused. I'm emotionally exhausted. I just can't make that decision tonight."

He moved to her. "Get some rest, then. We'll talk about it in the morning."

It was early next morning when, from the sofa, he heard the phone ringing. He got up and went to it. "Yes?"

"Brian Morrow?" It was the voice Cathi had described.

"I'm Dr. Morrow."

"And you know about me, don't you?"

"But I don't know what you want."

"I want you to have your girlfriend go to 2043 Edwards Street this morning at 10:30. By herself."

"Listen—"

The connection was broken.

Brian delivered the message, watching terror grow in her eyes. "Cathi, he is dangerous. We've got to give this to the police."

"I . . . can't. They couldn't protect me every second, even if they knew. And if he found out—" Her mouth turned grim. "No—I'm going where he asked me to. I have to know what he wants. There has to be an end to this."

"Well," he said reluctantly, "we'll take a cab this time. I'll stay out of sight. Then you can—"

She nodded, the fear still in her eyes. "Then I can."

She got out of the cab on the quiet street where there were small shops and a few unassuming homes. She walked along and stopped to look at the number on one of them. Then he stepped out of the front door. She felt her hands gripping shut. He came down the steps, smiling. "You brought no one with you?"

"No."

"The police would not be somewhere very near, would they?"

"No."

"Very good. And I am assuming you are telling the truth. That makes you so very much smarter than the blonde named Delle Black."

"I don't see—"

"I remained watching her apartment house after a . . . small visit I paid her. A car arrived. Two men got out and went inside. It was perfectly unmistakable that they were detectives. I've had too much experience not to know. When they came out again, I returned to the girl's apartment. I'm quite expert with simple locks. I, ah, took care of her once and for all." He was smiling again, a tight, parched smile, and pointed to a blue sedan parked at the curb. "Over there, please."

She moved to the car with him. He opened a back door, then jerked back a blanket to reveal Delle Black, lying with tucked-up legs on the back

seat. Her face had dried blood from the corner of her mouth to her ear. Her eyes were open and the pupils motionless. The man returned the blanket. "Do you see what happens to people who go to authorities?"

Cathi continued to stare at the blanket-covered form, then whirled and ran, hearing laughter behind her. She found Brian around the corner and went into his arms.

When she'd regained control, he asked, "Did you get the license number of the car?"

"No."

"What kind, then?"

"A blue sedan. In the middle of the block on the left."

He went to the corner. There was no longer a blue sedan on the street.

They returned to her apartment, where he said, "Cathi, we've got to bring in the police."

"But look what happened to her. I saw that." A quick shake of her head. "Anyway, what could we say to them?"

"Yes," he said. "We don't have the license number of the car. It was probably stolen anyway. And they'd just find that the girl wasn't in her apartment."

"So all we could tell them is about the phone calls, his talking to me on the street twice, and about a body we can't prove. . ."

The phone began ringing. He went to it.

"Will you get her, please?" said the caller.

Brian felt a sudden, blinding anger. "Now, listen—"

"Please do not do anything but what I say. She will be much, much safer if you respect my orders. Now hurry; please."

He willed himself to control his anger and looked across the room.

Cathi rose and moved to the telephone. "Please tell me what you want," she said in a dull voice.

"Perhaps the time has come."

"Then tell me!" she said, her voice rising.

"An exchange."

"Of what?"

"A hundred thousand dollars," he said in his high whispery voice, "for something that might be very valuable to you. Just a moment, please."

Then she heard with shock another entirely recognizable voice, say-

ing with strain, "Cathi, do what he wants! And don't tell the police, or he'll—" There was a groan and the telephone went dead.

She turned to Brian, eyes wide.

"What did he say?" Brian asked.

"He put someone else on," she whispered.

"Who?"

"Teddy."

She went to a chair and sat down numbly. Brian took her in his arms, experiencing some of the shock he knew she was feeling. Somehow Teddy Wolfe had returned to life; she was no longer free of that marriage.

"Are you sure it was Teddy?" he asked.

"Yes," she said positively. "Brian, my brain is whirling. I don't know what—"

The phone began ringing again. She got there ahead of him this time, lifting it, answering, waiting with pounding heart to hear one of the voices again—the caller's or her husband's.

It was the caller's. "Do you understand now? Your husband for the money."

"Please. If you'll just—"

"Is it deposited in the city?"

"Yes, but—"

"Remove it tomorrow morning. Every cent. Then, when you have it collected, buy a bright-red dress and red wig. Wear them and take a cab to . . ." He gave her an address in Chinatown, as well as instructions as to where to leave the cab and proceed on foot. When she had delivered the money, he said, she would have her husband back.

Then, again, she heard that deeply familiar voice, saying, "Do it, Cathi. Please do exactly as he says."

"Teddy," she whispered.

"Please, Cathi."

She felt her hand trembling as it held the receiver to her ear. "But how are you alive, Teddy?"

The connection was gone.

They sat in silence. At last Brian said, "You can't, Cathi."

She remained silent, her face impassive now.

"Once he has the money, he doesn't need you alive anymore. Don't you see that?"

"Teddy asked me to." She sounded distant, barely there.

"But there aren't any guarantees."

"He's my husband." She looked at him. "If he's been returned to me, I can't have his life lost, not again, because I wouldn't meet my obligation to him."

"Cathi—don't you have an obligation to me? I thought you knew by now. I love you, and—"

"Then you're in love with a woman whose husband is alive."

"Regardless—"

"No," she insisted. "*I have* that obligation."

"The girl that was killed," he said, feeling desperate. "You know now that she and Teddy—"

"It doesn't matter," she said in that too-calm voice.

He shook his head, feeling defeated, knowing she would not waver. "When you've collected the money," he said, "where do you take it?"

He waited, but she did not respond.

"You don't trust me?"

There was still no answer.

"Do you think I'd turn that information over to the police?"

"Yes," she said coolly.

The following morning he parked in the garage beneath Union Square. Then, carrying the suitcase she'd chosen for the purpose, he went with her to the downtown establishments where she'd deposited the insurance money. She closed accounts and put currency in the bag.

They then went to a department store where she purchased a red wig and a red dress. She changed into the dress and put on the wig and accompanied him to the crowded sidewalk outside. He said, "I'm not letting you do this alone, Cathi."

She held out her hand. "I want the suitcase, Brian."

Reluctantly he gave it to her. "I'm staying with you."

She turned suddenly and ran.

He tried to follow through the crowd, but she reached an empty cab parked at a signal light ahead of him. She got into the cab as the light changed. The cab moved on.

In frustration he looked for another cab and found none. . . .

Cathi directed the cab away from her destination until she was certain Brian was not following. Then she instructed the driver to the intersection in Chinatown where she had been told to get out.

There, with the suitcase, she stepped out onto a narrow street running between tenements. She moved through throngs of tourists and Orientals until she found the designated half-number basement section of one of the buildings.

She stepped into a dank corridor that was dimly lit. There were several numbered doors—but he had not specified which.

Then, from a stairway at the end of the corridor, a figure appeared. Cathi could not be certain at first, then, as the person came closer, she saw that it was Delle Black, alive and un battered.

"I don't understand," she breathed.

"You will," the girl said. She knocked on one of the doors and said, "She's here."

The door opened and the white-faced caller stood smiling, saying in his whispery voice, "Come in, won't you?"

Cathi moved inside with the other girl. He took her suitcase, then motioned her to a chair in the small, dingy room. He put the bag on a chipped desk and sat down behind it. "Are you sure she came alone?"

Delle Black, leaning against the now-closed door, said, "I watched her from an upper hall window when she got out of the cab. She walked all by her red-wigged Occidental self to this building."

The caller opened the suitcase and removed a stack of currency, smiling again, looking at Cathi. He gestured toward the blonde girl. "Very good theatrics, no? Having you believe she was dead? And effective, I think. You did get the point—no police."

"Where is my husband?" Cathi asked coldly.

"The money first." The man counted it carefully, stack after stack. Finally he returned the currency to the suitcase, closed the bag, and said, "Excellent. You might, of course, have chosen higher-return investments. But you did choose safely. Well done."

"You have the money," Cathi said. "*Now where is my husband?*"

The man motioned to himself with a white hand and said in Teddy Wolfe's voice, "Right here, Cathi."

She sat motionless, staring at the masklike face, not wanting to believe it but knowing it was true.

"I'll explain, if you like."

She managed to nod.

"When my plane was hit, I was wounded in the body and face and the co-pilot was killed. I managed to parachute out. I reached the ground and made my way to where the plane had gone down. I found the rest of the crew dead. Even though I was in pain and needed medical attention, I saw a way to create this money I've just counted. Are you following, my dear?"

She did not respond.

"I think you are," he said. "So I changed identification with the co-pilot, who was so badly shot up that he was no longer recognizable. I made my escape into South Vietnam, repairing gradually on my own. The scars left by the face wounds were rather hideous, but that made no difference if the plan worked." His smile reappeared tightly. He tapped fingers against the suitcase. "I reached Saigon, where I lost myself in the back streets—doing whatever I had to do to exist. Then I hired a native surgeon to perform more work on this face you see to remove my identity entirely. My fingerprints were also destroyed. Would you have believed I was capable of all that?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then I got into the gem-trading business. And I knew that when I'd earned enough money to gain freighter fare back to this city, I would find out if another man had been buried in my name, if you had received the insurance, and if you had saved it. Delle's visit with you in the restaurant confirmed all of that, didn't it? You are indeed conservative, Cathi, and I am grateful for that."

"But *why*?" she said. "Why do all this? The calls, the—"

"Because I know something else about you. You are uncommonly independent and strong-minded. With lesser methods I thought—and quite correctly, I believe—that you might turn obstinate and difficult about turning over the money. So I decided on a bizarre approach. And it worked; even with old friend Brian around. Because here is the money. And that is very nice, Cathi. I'll return to Asia and buy enough gems to achieve millions for myself."

"For us," the blonde girl said with sudden anger.

The man behind the desk fell silent, a slight smile showing.

The girl moved toward him. "I've helped you with all of this. *Lived* with you! We're going together—"

Teddy Wolfe had opened a drawer of the desk and now he removed

a pistol with a silencer from the drawer. He pointed the gun at the blonde. "Not so, my dear. I have no need for you now." The pistol moved so that it pointed at Cathi. "Nor you. But which of you first?"

Cathi saw, with side vision, Delle Black's hand moving with lightning speed to her bra. It returned with a small derringer, which she fired at Teddy Wolfe. And fired and fired. He half turned in her direction, trying to return the fire, then slumped forward over the desk.

The blonde girl took the handle of the suitcase. She looked at Cathi with gleaming eyes. "Somebody will be coming quickly, but not before. . . ."

He'd seen a cab coming along seconds after Cathi's had moved on, got into it and sent it in the same direction she'd taken. He'd urged the driver to speed, then finally found a woman with red hair in a cab ahead. He'd had the driver get close enough so that he was certain it was she and followed her the distance to Chinatown.

There, he'd gotten out after she had and remained well behind, seeing her enter the building. He'd waited then, forcing himself not to go on, but finally he could no longer restrain himself. He'd moved ahead and carefully stepped into the basement section.

Now he heard the rapid firing of a gun behind one of the doors, followed by the sound of a woman's voice. He kicked the flimsy door open, saw Cathi and a blonde girl who was turning to point a pistol in his direction. He dove at her, chopping the gun from her hand.

"Cathi?" he asked, holding the other girl. "Are you all right?"

She stood and nodded, looking on in shock.

He turned to the figure slumped at the desk. "The caller?"

"Teddy," she said dully.

He sat beside her in the waiting room designated for his flight. There was still visible evidence of what she had been through, but she was smiling at him. "I'm glad you were here, Brian."

He smiled back. "I'd like you to go home with me."

"No," she said. "I'm not ready. Perhaps I will be, in time."

His flight was called. They stood. He kissed her. "When you are, if you are. . . ." he said softly.

"I know the way to Elyria," she said.

He lifted his flight bag and moved off to board the plane.

A good head for business is an asset in any line of work.

GUEST SPOT



by
ALBERT
AVELLANO

They kept referring to it as the Green Room. It didn't make sense to me. The walls and ceiling were covered with buff-colored acoustical tile, and the ankle-deep, wall-to-wall carpeting was a rich chocolate brown. The couches and chairs arranged around the two-color video monitors were upholstered in heavy-duty, imitation leather. If there was any green in the room, it must have been under the make-up of the more apprehensive guests.

The Green Room was simply a high-class waiting room. There we all sat—guests, agents, friends of guests, network VIP's, and show staff—watching the in-progress taping of "The Toby Morgan Show" on the closed-circuit monitors.

From time to time one of the talent coordinators would come for a guest, and a few minutes later he or she would appear on the flickering screens. The laughter of the other guests in the Green Room was strident and forced. I could tell that even the well-known personalities were feeling a bit uptight, and that made my own nervousness easier to accept.

One of the writers sat down beside me. She was a slim woman who took quick puffs on an extra-long cigarette and had an especially obnoxious habit of rubbing her hands and arms and hugging herself. She seemed very high-strung and tense, as though her nerves were pulled tight and might snap at any moment. All this, along with her whining voice, had irritated the hell out of me earlier, and I think she knew it.

"Feeling all right?" she asked without a trace of concern in her tone.

I shrugged and took a sip of Coke. She had come into the make-up room a couple of hours before while I was sitting in the barber's chair being prepared for the show. The make-up man painted my scalp with a brown paint because my hair was thin in back. "Otherwise you'll look bald under the lights," he explained.

She had taken a seat in front of me and produced a stenographer's pad and a ballpoint pen. She asked questions about prison, my criminal career, and the book that carried my byline. I gave her the answers I figured she wanted to hear, the ones my lawyer had coached me to tell; but I didn't reveal that the book had been written by a Chicago reporter I'd never met, or that I'd read only the first and last chapters. She listened to my replies in a totally bored way, but took extensive notes.

"What's all this for?" I asked.

"I'm going to write your interview," she said, speaking in a tone that's usually reserved for small children or the mentally retarded. "Nothing happens on the show that isn't planned."

Now she was back again, showing a phony interest I didn't understand or want. I was too busy trying to get my head together for my interview.

I had been watching "The Toby Morgan Show" for weeks, ever since

I had learned I was scheduled to appear. It seemed to follow the same format night after night: First there would be Toby Morgan's monologue, followed by fifteen minutes of chatter with his regular announcer. Next there would be some well-known celebrity with a new movie or TV series to push or something else to promote. Then there would be a line of singers, comics, and sometimes a politician, and at the tail end the people, like myself, who had books to sell. If the others ran long, my appearance would be cut; but if the others didn't stretch their time to its limit, I might have considerably more than the usual five-minute spot. Morgan's job was to keep everything moving, despite the intrusion of advertisements, and prevent viewers from realizing that "The Toby Morgan Show" was actually one long commercial.

The lady writer looked pointedly at my Coke. "Would you like me to get you a real drink?" she asked.

"No, thanks," I answered. Right then there weren't many things I would have liked to have more than a strong drink, but I knew better than to take one. My ex-partner Benny Peters had always taken a few "readying" belts before a job, and it had cost him his life. When a bank guard rushed out after him one July afternoon, Benny'd still had one foot on the sidewalk in front of the bank long after he should have been disappearing in his getaway car. Booze makes you feel good, but it slows you down.

"You're feeling uptight," she said. "I can always tell. Have a drink—it'll make you feel better. There's still time. You won't be called for a while."

The show was running fast. Unless one of the guests suddenly clicked with the audience, I'd be introduced within the next fifteen minutes and have almost that much time to fill before the show finished. I took another sip of Coke and stared at the monitor.

"I thought you were a tough guy," she taunted, but I ignored her and she finally moved away.

A few minutes later an assistant led me past two closed doors and positioned me near the entrance arch. He told me what visual signal to watch for before stepping onto the stage. "You'll be great!" he said, clapping me on the shoulder, then retreated back the way we had come.

When the signal finally came, I took a deep breath and stepped out

onto the lighted stage. Applause continued until I reached Toby Morgan.

Morgan was a small, narrow-faced man who sat behind a desk on a platform by his seated guests. The others had moved down the line of seats, leaving the chair beside the desk vacant for me. I sat down and tried to remain calm and relaxed.

"You weren't able to hear your introduction, were you?" Morgan asked, flashing his famous little-boy smile.

"Ah. . . no, I wasn't."

"I told the audience that the next guest would be Edmond 'Trigger' Toland who was recently released from a life-prison sentence on a technicality. That's right, isn't it? You *were* released on a technicality?"

"That's what the law is," I said. "Technicalities. The same set of statutes that put me in prison let me out."

Morgan continued, "And I said you have a book that has just been published." He held up a copy of *The Life and Crimes of Trigger Toland*. The dust jacket showed a picture of a blood-smeared wooden wall on which the title had been written with bullet holes. It was as tasteless as the contents I had sampled. I was embarrassed, but I knew my lawyer would be pleased at the exposure the book was getting. He had told me that an appearance on "The Toby Morgan Show" was certain to sell from twenty to fifty thousand copies.

Morgan said, "Now tell me, Trigger—don't you think the public should be outraged? Don't you think there is something disgusting about you profiting from your long history of crime?"

Morgan wasn't talking to me. He was facing the camera with the red light in front of it, showing it was the one broadcasting the picture; at the same time he was watching his producer for signs of approval and listening to the audience reaction. Instead of his usual bland interview, he was planning to do a hatchet job on me.

That explained the writer's behavior. When she had talked to me in the make-up room, it was to find my weak points so she could provide Morgan with the most probing questions. And there was nothing she would have liked better than for me to have taken a few drinks and come onstage too fuzzyheaded to do anything except provide Morgan with additional openings.

Now that I understood the game and how it was played, I felt less apprehensive. I sat back in the chair and rested my hands comfortably

on the arms. "Why are you looking over there?" I asked Morgan, causing him to turn back to me.

He brushed aside my question. "Do you think you should profit from a thing like this?" He held the book out in front of him with two fingers, like something too unclean to touch.

"I'm not profiting from it," I said. "The lawyer who got me out of prison gets it all. That's the way it is with lawyers—they always get it all."

"Aren't you satisfied with your attorney?"

"There's nothing to be satisfied or dissatisfied about. We made a deal, that's all. I gave him all my cash and the rights to my life story, and he got me out of prison. He kept his part of the bargain, and I'm keeping mine."

Morgan said sarcastically, "Thank you for the lesson in criminal ethics."

I held my right palm out to him briefly, in a magnanimous gesture. "Anytime," I said; and the audience laughed.

Morgan didn't like my getting a laugh at his expense. That was plain from the way his smile tightened. "In that case, perhaps you would be kind enough to give us the benefit of your expertise?"

"Certainly," I agreed. "What would you like to know?"

"In your *expert* opinion, which crime is the easiest to commit and avoid capture?"

I smiled. "Murder." The audience gasped.

"Murder," Morgan repeated.

"I mean murder for profit, of course. A murder where the actual killer doesn't know the victim, has no reason to want the person dead except the money he is paid to do the job, and will never be on the list of suspects." I crossed my legs and elaborated for him. "Say you want someone dead. All you have to do is look around until you find someone mentioned in a newspaper or magazine you think may be willing to kill for money. You send him the name, address, normal schedule, and picture of his target along with three to five thousand dollars, depending upon how quickly and cleanly you want the murder to be carried out. You explain in an unsigned letter that the money sent is only half the fee you are willing to pay. An equal amount will be sent once the victim has been disposed of."

"That's stupid," Morgan sneered. "What's to keep the man from

simply pocketing the first money and doing nothing? Or if he does kill, why would anyone bother to pay the balance? I think you're making this up."

"The man who is propositioned may not kill, but he won't keep the money if he's told to send it to someone else along with the murder request. He may not be a killer, but he knows that the person doing the hiring is. On the other hand, once he kills, he can be certain he'll get the rest of his money because at that point it would be easy for him to discover who hired him. All he has to do is find out who had the most to gain from the murder and had a perfect alibi—was out of the country or had checked into a hospital at the time, for instance."

Morgan kept after me for a few more minutes, but when he couldn't get me angry or rattled he pretended his attack had been a joke, gave the book another plug, and thanked all us guests for being there.

As I was leaving, I saw the writer who had tried to set me up. She was waiting for the elevator in the corridor outside the studio.

I stopped in front of her. "I ought to break your jaw, but I won't," I said.

She gave me a challenging stare. "Why not?"

"Because you'd love it," I said.

Three days later a small package arrived at my New York apartment. It contained \$4500, a name, address and photograph, and a schedule of the proposed victim's movements. The next day there were two more.

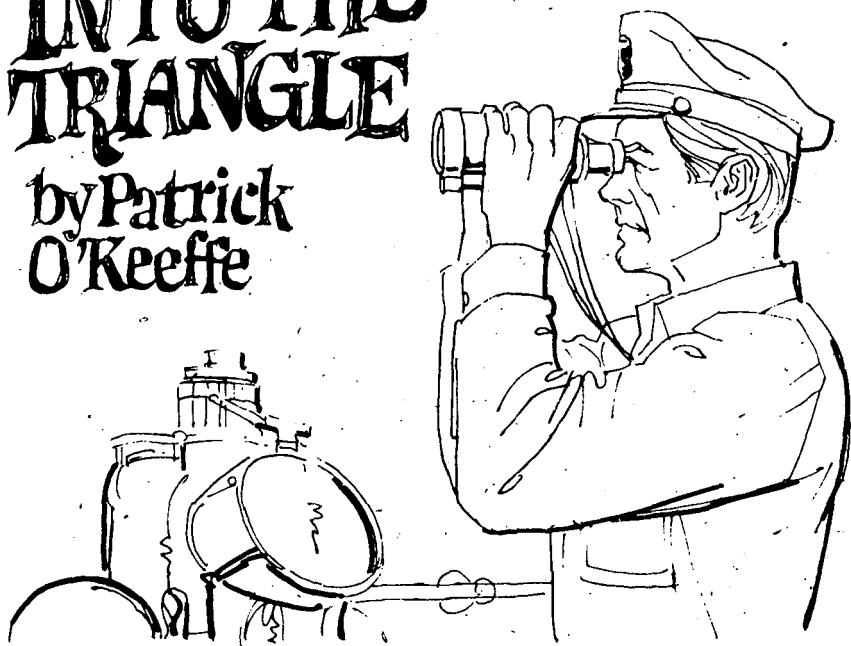
It pays to advertise.



"It's another Devil's Sea. Ships have been lost in it for hundreds of years, and now planes . . ."

INTO THE TRIANGLE

by Patrick O'Keeffe



At the outset of her last voyage, it could perhaps be said that the *Chimbote* seemed fated to be added to the list of ships with entire crews that had mysteriously vanished without trace in the Bermuda Triangle. Although she had sailed from Mobile into a dead calm sea, she carried a slow lazy roll. Laden to her summer marks with scrap iron, she should have been as steady as a Gulf offshore oil rig, yet she swayed like an overcrowded excursion steamer in a swollen river.

The *Chimbote* was a 4,000-ton freighter of South American registry and had been in coastwise service in the Amazon area for ten years before being sent to Mobile for drydocking and extensive overhaul. While she was under repair, the small firm owning her had failed and the shipyard eventually came into possession of her through a lien. The yard had been unable to induce a shipping line to buy or charter her. Finally, after she had rusted idle in a corner of the yard for over a year, an unnamed marine speculator had bought her for sale to a Scottish shipbreaking concern and loaded her with scrap iron for additional profit and ballast.

Captain, officers and crew were complete strangers to one another, and kept to the minimum necessary for manning her. Under contract to no union, the *Chimbote* was free to sign on all comers regardless of nationality, at low foreign-flag rate of pay with right to an economy-class flight back to the United States. Those who had been willing to accept were men out of a ship and hard up, not always for the best of reasons, and Mulligan, the big flat-nosed agent who had recruited them, hadn't been overconcerned whether a man had sauntered down the gangway of his last ship or had been booted down it. The credentials of the man who was to command her, however, were no secret to him. Captain Mack had formerly commanded a Central American coaster on the Pacific side until he was jailed and deported to the United States for attempting to smuggle an exiled counter-revolutionary leader into the vessel's home port.

At breakfast during the *Chimbote's* first morning at sea, the chief mate muttered, "I don't like this queer roll she's got." Mr. Davies was middle-aged, a dark Welshman who had become dissatisfied aboard a Liberian-flag grain ship and quit to get a voyage home in the *Chimbote*.

"She's a bit cranky," Captain Mack agreed. He was in his forties, a brown-haired man of modest build and mild-mannered, who looked as if he wouldn't risk smuggling a pack of cigarettes much less the deadly enemy of a dictator, however right the price.

"I've been hunting all over for old logs and records," the chief mate said. "She seems to have been cleaned out of everything while she was laid up."

"She was loaded correctly as far as I can see," the captain remarked. "Enough scrap in the tween decks to keep her from being stiff. She's

down to her marks: If we run into a gale, we may have to stiffen her by using the ballast tanks, which would mean overloading her."

"This looks like being a voyage by guess and by God," the chief mate said dismally.

"And by the grace of the engines," the chief engineer growled, a lean, sallow-faced man who cheerfully admitted to losing his job as first assistant of a reefer ship for thumping the chief engineer one on the nose. "I'm going to have to shut down after breakfast."

During the forenoon the *Chimbote* lay idle for two hours or so. She was fitted with turbo-electric propulsion and the main motor had heated up. With no way on the ship, she drifted at random, and at times the strange roll became more pronounced. Jalks, the second mate, who had not been present when it was discussed in the saloon at breakfast, voiced his alarm at the supper table.

"Cap'n, this ship's another *Waratah*," he stated flatly. Jalks was approaching thirty, with heavy-lidded eyes, his crew cut contrasting with his straggly brown mustache and giving him an odd appearance. He had lost his job as chief mate of a new containership when the line failed to survive the competition.

"*Waratah*?" the captain repeated, puzzled.

"The British liner lost off the coast of South Africa in 1909. After her maiden voyage, her captain reported her unstable; she gave long rolls like this ship. Nothing was done about it. She vanished on her second voyage, with 119 hands and 92 passengers."

Captain Mack nodded. "I remember reading about her sometime or other. But you can't compare the *Chimbote* with her. This ship's a bit cranky, probably due to faulty loading, but that doesn't mean she's unstable."

"She's unstable," the second mate insisted. "She's unseaworthy. Even her engines are breaking down already, and the voyage has only just begun."

"They didn't break down," the chief engineer put in. "I stopped them to clear up a ground on the main motor."

"They'll start breaking down, as is to be expected of a ship laid up so long. What's more, she's going into the Bermuda Triangle."

"Is that bad?" the captain asked curiously.

"It's another Devil's Sea. Ships have been lost without trace in it for hundreds of years, and now planes. It's a death trap for unseaworthy

ships." The second mate pointed dramatically to a porthole, beyond which the horizon was slowly rising and falling. "If this ship's like this in a flat sea, what'll she be like in a gale? She'll capsize without warning. She'll be an easy victim for the forces of evil in the Triangle."

The second mate spoke with fanatical vehemence, his heavy-lidded eyes flashing almost with each word. Captain Mack glanced over the faces of the other officers present—chief mate, chief engineer, radio officer. Their expressions indicated that the second mate's outburst had not left them undisturbed.

"Mr. Jalks," the captain said stilly, "you knew the ship was to pass through the Triangle when you signed on, taking the summer route right across it instead of following the Gulf Stream over."

"I didn't know she was another *Waratah*."

"And now you've assumed she is, what's on your mind?"

"You should head for the nearest port for a stability test before taking her into the Triangle."

Captain Mack stared at Jalks for a long moment, as if in mingled disbelief and amusement. "Just because the ship happens to be a little tender and you've got a thing about the Bermuda Triangle! You can't be serious, Mr. Jalks, wanting me to be the first captain to run scared of the Triangle! No way at all, Mr. Jalks," the captain said, and then rose and went out.

Toward the end of the chief mate's watch that evening, Captain Mack went to the bridge. The *Chimbote* had passed through the Florida Straits into the Atlantic and was approaching the base line of the Triangle, running from southern Florida across to Puerto Rico, with the apex at Bermuda. The wind had freshened from the southeast, and although the sea was scarcely more than choppy, the *Chimbote* was indulging in long, sluggish rolls from which she seemed reluctant to return.

"Captain Mack," the chief mate murmured, "I think I ought to let you know the second mate's going around the crew to get backing for an all-hands radiogram to the Coast Guard, to get her ordered back to port as unseaworthy."

"He's wasting his breath," the captain scoffed. "The U. S. Coast Guard doesn't have jurisdiction over a foreign-flag vessel at sea."

"He says the Coast Guard'll get in touch with the owner to order you back."

"The only man the Coast Guard'll be able to get in touch with will be big Mulligan, the ship's agent. He'll leave it up to me to decide about continuing with the voyage, and most likely tell the Coast Guard to go to hell."

Captain Mack laughed at some hidden humor in his remark, and then went into the wheelhouse to the telephone. Returning to the chief mate, he said, "I phoned the radio officer not to send any radiograms without first bringing them to me for my approval. That'll take care of sea-lawyer Jalks."

"He's certainly hopped up about the Bermuda Triangle," the chief mate commented lugubriously. "You don't seem to think there's anything to it?"

"Mr. Davies, as you undoubtedly know ships have been lost in the area almost ever since the Ark was launched. That's to be expected, since it's about the busiest and stormiest area in the world. In recent years, planes with their entire crews and passengers have been disappearing in the area, or at least were known to have entered the area. That's how it came to be named the Triangle, from the triangular pattern of a flight of Navy planes lost in it just after World War II. You seldom heard any mention of the area until lately, not until the sensational writers began playing it up and turning out books and newspaper articles."

"Where does the second mate get the notion of evil forces loose in the area?"

"I suppose he gets it from some of the explanations put forward to clear up the mysteries. The strange thing about disappearances in the Triangle is that ships and planes have vanished without trace, leaving not so much as a lifejacket or an oil slick, perhaps without making a distress call though fitted with radio. Freak waves, abnormal magnetic or gravitational phenomena, air turbulence, too, I can buy, but not flying saucers, men from outer space who colonized a now submerged area years ago and are still active. That's too fantastic for me. And the Coast Guard too. They don't buy any of that far-out stuff, and that's good enough for me. Fanatics like the second mate will add their own superstition to the area, like the inadvisability of sailing on Friday the thirteenth."

"I'm always nervous about sailing on the thirteenth," muttered the chief mate.

"But you've never come to grief through it! Keep that in mind if you start getting nervous about this voyage through the Triangle!"

The *Chimbote* entered the Triangle early next morning, and soon afterward she had to stop again to allow the engineers to adjust one of the turbines. The ship's lazy roll lengthened as she drifted beam onto a light swell, and when the first assistant engineer was on an engine-room ladder carrying tools, he overbalanced and fell head-first onto the engine-room floor plates. Captain Mack rushed below with his first-aid bag. The engineer was unconscious. The captain had him taken up to his room and laid on the bunk.

Fearing a fractured skull and possible brain damage, Captain Mack went to the radio room to arrange to have the injured man placed under a doctor's care with a minimum of delay. The second mate intercepted him on the way.

"You've made your point about going into the Triangle, Cap'n, so it shouldn't keep you from heading back to port with the first assistant."

"Quite so, Mr. Jalks, except that it would take too long."

The captain then brushed past the second mate, indifferent to the anger flaring up in the heavy-lidded eyes. In the radio room, the captain wrote out a medico message to the Coast Guard, and then got the radio officer to make a general "All Ships" call for a ship with a doctor, in the hope that one would be close by and he would be able to get the first assistant under medical attention without having to wait for the Coast Guard to send a plane.

A cruise ship responded almost immediately with her position, which was virtually just over the horizon. Captain Mack radioed back the *Chimbote's* position. The white pleasure ship, her name *Ariel* in large black letters across her bow, loomed up about an hour later and hove to within easy rowing distance of the *Chimbote*. She was on a special cruise to nowhere, and gaily dressed vacationists lined her rails to stare across at the grimy freighter, on which no paint and polish had been wasted for her last voyage, officers and crew in old khakis and work clothes.

Mr. Davies had cleared away one of the lifeboats, and the first assistant, head bandaged but now conscious, was brought up from his room in a wire-basket-type stretcher and laid in the lifeboat. The engineers' messman was detailed to go with the lifeboat to keep an eye on the patient. The lifeboat was then lowered and, with two sailors manning

the oars and the second mate at the tiller in charge, the lifeboat pulled across the short stretch of sparkling sea toward the *Ariel*. The cruise ship had lowered her broad accommodation ladder in readiness to receive the lifeboat. Compared with the *Chimbote*, gently seesawing in what was now a rippleless surface, the *Ariel* was so steady as to make her accommodation ladder seem like a flight of steps down the side of a pier.

Watching with the chief mate from the bridge, Captain Mack saw white-uniformed sailors lift the stretcher from the lifeboat and carry it to the deck. At the same time, the second mate jumped from the lifeboat and followed them. He reappeared among the passengers at the rail and called down something to the three men in the boat. They seemed to hesitate, looking at one another, and then they too jumped onto the accommodation ladder and hurried to the top.

"Now what are they up to?" muttered Captain Mack.

He saw the second mate leave the rails and go up to the bridge, where he spoke to a white-uniformed officer who was undoubtedly the captain. The captain came out to the wing of the bridge and surveyed the *Chimbote* through binoculars for a few moments, and then turned and went into the wheelhouse, followed by Jalks.

Captain Mack's muttered query was answered presently when his radio officer came hastening to the bridge with a radiogram. Captain Mack glanced over it, then crushed the form in his hand.

"The second mate and the boat's crew refuse to return," he told the chief mate in disgust. "He's charging that the *Chimbote* is unseaworthy, and I'm deliberately risking the lives of all hands by stubbornly taking her through the Triangle. The captain of the *Ariel* asked me what action I propose to take."

"Nothing much you can do about it," Mr. Davies said dismally. "They've claimed the safety of his ship. You can't expect him to force them back against their will."

Turning to the radio officer, Captain Mack said, "Radio my sincere thanks to the captain of the *Ariel* for taking aboard my injured engineer officer. As for the second mate, tell the captain good riddance. Even the rats haven't begun to leave her yet."

The crew, however, displayed an unwillingness to wait for that exodus to start. The desertion by the second mate and the boat's crew on the high seas stirred them to apprehension, and that evening after

supper, when the *Chimbote* was again under way, a delegation of three came to the bridge. They represented the deck, engine, and steward departments, with the bosun as spokesman. He was big and swarthy, a hairy, tattooed mat showing under his half-open denim shirt; he had missed his Honduran-flag banana boat by getting drunk the night before she sailed.

"Cap'n," he began plaintively, "the crew figures the second mate was right, an' it ain't safe to take this ship through the Triangle."

"Bosun," the captain said mildly, "but for the second mate you and the rest of the crew would have taken this ship to be a bit cranky and let it go at that. And you knew when you signed on where she was bound."

"We didn't know about her bein' another *Waratah*, like Mr. Jalks said, an' this bein' a Devil's Sea to trap her."

"The *Waratah* was lost on her second voyage, no one knows how despite exaggerated stories about her not being stable. This ship's been running for a good ten years." Captain Mack gestured out over the darkening calm sea. "Does this look like a Devil's Sea, Bosun?"

"It could come on to blow all of a sudden, Cap'n."

"The forecast for the area is favorable—all gentle to moderate winds. In another two days or so, we'll be out of the Triangle, if it's that that's really bothering you."

"That's what we're all scared of," the bosun replied uneasily. "We figure you could radio another ship to come an' take us off."

Captain Mack chose to reason with the men rather than antagonize them with an outright rejection. "Abandon ship because of the nonsense the second mate spread around!" The captain smiled. "Bosun, you can't mean it."

"It ain't nonsense," the bosun demurred. "You're riskin' all our lives for a junk ship full o' junk."

"I'm putting my life on the line too. Do you think I'd do that for a junk ship if I thought she'd flop over in the first gale to blow up?"

The bosun seemed unable to find an answer to the captain's last point. He stared at the captain in baffled silence for a long moment and then turned in defeat to his two companions.

"It's like I said—he'd listen to us and that's all." The bosun turned back toward the bridge ladder. The other two delegates hesitated, and then followed him down the steps.

Captain Mack's belief in the seaworthiness of the *Chimbote*, however, was shaken the next day by a radio glimpse into her past. When the captain was taking his afternoon coffee, the radio officer appeared in his doorway. The radio officer, a skinny young man with a tuft of blond beard, had returned to the sea after losing his savings in a radio-television repair shop; he now looked as if he rued his choice of ship.

"I was just chewing the rag with the operator on another ship," he said dolefully. "He asked me what the *Chimbote* was doing up in the North Atlantic. He'd heard about her when he was on the tanker run between Mexico and South America. He said crews would seldom stay in her more than one voyage. Scared she'd turn over. Something wrong with her build, and attempts to correct it with structural changes and ballast had always failed."

Captain Mack was quick to act. "He was probably exaggerating. Stories about jinxed or queer-acting ships get blown up in the telling. Keep this to yourself. I don't want to have to calm a jittery crew all over again."

After the radio officer had withdrawn, however, Captain Mack finished his coffee in troubled doubt. The *Chimbote* might really be another *Waratah* after all, vulnerable despite her ten years of service. She'd always run coastwise, perhaps never been exposed to anything approaching a North Atlantic gale. Perhaps it was a mistake not to have turned back with the first hint of her weakness.

Captain Mack finally shook off his apprehension as based on pure hearsay. He was allowing himself to be frightened by fable, not by fact, just as the crew had been given the jitters by the second mate's imaginations about evil forces in the Triangle.

Nevertheless, Captain Mack anxiously awaited the daily weather reports, hoping that a storm wouldn't arise to test the *Chimbote's* reputation and perhaps prove it true. After leaving the Triangle, the ship ran into the effect of a storm raging to the southeast, which set up a fairly heavy ground swell along the *Chimbote's* course. The ship began to seesaw alarmingly, and fiddles had to be fitted to the dining tables to prevent dishes from sliding off. Captain Mack eventually altered course to put the great heaving mounds of smooth water astern rather than abeam, to lessen the rolling. The experience impressed upon him the ease with which a ship could vanish mysteriously, not only in the

Triangle, but elsewhere in the world. An overtender or faultily loaded ship would turn turtle in a heavy ground swell before the radio officer could get out a distress call, and an investigation into the disappearance would fail to produce reports of a storm in the area.

Except for an occasional rain squall, the good weather prevailed for the rest of the *Chimbote's* final voyage. While she was proceeding up the Irish Sea after making her Fastnet landfall, transistor radios on board began picking up news broadcasts from local stations, and Captain Mack learned that he was being hailed as the man who defied the Bermuda Triangle. When the cruise ship *Ariel* had docked with the *Chimbote's* deserters on board, the press had taken up their story and followed the progress of the *Chimbote* to her destination.

Not long after she dropped anchor in the River Clyde off the ship-breakers' yard, newspaper and television reporters were allowed on board, and Captain Mack was promptly interviewed and photographed in his room and out on deck. He was plied with queries about the voyage, and he volunteered the hearsay account of the ship's reputation.

"Captain Mack," one of the reporters told him, "your second mate checked into the *Chimbote's* past, to seek justification for deserting the ship. He found out that the *Chimbote* had indeed a reputation as a cranky ship and crews didn't stay long in her. If you'd known that at the time the second mate urged you to put into port for a stability test, would you have done so?"

"Beyond all doubt."

As Captain Mack replied, he thought of the numerous boxes of rifles and handguns big Mulligan had told him were hidden under the scrap iron, being smuggled out of the country for the outlawed Irish Republican Army. A stability test would have revealed them, but he could have disclaimed knowing about them. Not even the handsome bonus big Mulligan had promised would be paid to him at the end of a successful voyage would have induced him to continue with it.



It was one of the oldest restaurants in Paris—rich men had been bringing their mistresses here for more than a hundred years . . .

Vintage Murder by Vincent McConnor



The chestnut trees along the Champs Elysées were so heavy with leaves that it was impossible to see the night sky.

Chief Inspecteur Damiot, in the speeding police car, his assistant, Graudin, silent behind the wheel, observed the people—mostly couples—strolling at the edge of the park.

Straight ahead, up the sloping avenue, the Arc de Triomphe stood in its usual glare of floodlights.

It had been months since he had seen the avenue at this hour. People would soon be pouring out of the theaters and heading for home, hotel or café. Terrace tables would be crowded for a few hours, then the lights would start to go out.

This restaurant where he was going, *La Belle Époque*, was an odd place for a murder. A double murder—although his instructions on the phone hadn't been definite as to whether it was a double murder or murder and suicide. Two people dead. The man, apparently, was somebody important—André Renant, a wealthy businessman. The woman's name hadn't been mentioned.

Graudin slowed the police car to the curb.

Damiot saw several official cars parked in the street. Some of the others were ahead of him, although Braudin had picked him up less than ten minutes after the phone call.

He got out and peered up and down the avenue with its expensive restaurants and shops. This was an area where crimes of violence—especially murder—never happened. There was heavy security here because the President's Palace was around the corner.

Graudin joined him and they walked toward the restaurant. A policeman on guard at the entrance saluted as they approached.

No garish neon here. Only a discreet sign—*La Belle Époque*—on a small enamel plaque. Graudin darted ahead to open the door.

Damiot entered a shallow foyer, where shaded wall sconces were reflected in mirrored walls, and continued on toward a glass inner door through which he glimpsed the velvet richness of the restaurant beyond. Before he could grasp the handle a waiter swung the door open. "We are closed for the night, Monsieur."

"Chief Inspector Damiot. Police Judiciaire."

"Ah. You are to go upstairs. This way, Monsieur Inspecteur—"

Damiot followed, Graudin behind him, past a cloakroom where an attractive blonde watched them with inquisitive eyes. He saw that the distant diningroom was spacious and attractive. People were at tables in a glow of candlelight, waiters darting attendance.

They continued on, past a curving staircase, to an elevator. Damiot entered the jewel box of an elevator where an antique bench, upholstered in white and gold, rested at the back. He faced the door as Graudin and the waiter stepped in, leaving no room for another person. "Where are you taking us?"

"Second floor, Monsieur Inspecteur," the waiter answered, closing the elevator door. "One of our private rooms." He touched a button and the small cage began to move, slowly and almost silently.

"When did these people die?"

The waiter shrugged. "They were found more than an hour ago."

Damiot was conscious of an increasing murmur of sound as the elevator rose through the building. "Who discovered them?"

"Couldn't say. I've been in the diningroom all evening. Too bad about Monsieur Renant."

"You knew the dead man?"

"He's been eating here for years. Although I never served him. He always dines in a private room."

"Even when he's alone?"

"Monsieur Renant was never alone." He slid the door back. "Here we are, Monsieur Inspecteur."

Graudin stepped out first, followed by Damiot, into a blur of voices which was silenced as faces turned toward the newcomers.

Damiot saw that the narrow paneled corridor had four closed doors and was crowded with men. He recognized a deputy public prosecutor with a young magistrate's clerk who was writing in a notebook, and a police photographer talking to Dr. Courval from the medical department. Most of the others would be members of the restaurant's staff.

"Damiot!" Courval hurried to meet him. "I was waiting for you. There's nothing more I can do here. Looks like a simple case. . ."

Damiot grimaced wryly. "I hope so, mon ami."

"Two people poisoned. Murder and suicide, obviously." He led Damiot through the crowd as he talked. "All you have to do is find which is the murderer and which the victim. The man or the girl?"

Damiot nodded to familiar faces as he followed Courval toward a door which he saw, when they came closer, had been smashed open. The dry wood was splintered near the lock.

"They'll be coming any minute for the bodies." Courval pushed the door open.

Damiot stepped into a room that wasn't much larger than a cupboard. He realized now why everyone had been standing in the corridor.

Two men from the crime lab were bending over the table, taking fingerprints.

He noticed the gray-green paneled walls, probably eighteenth-century, hung with framed menus and prints of old Paris.

"The girl's a beauty," Courval whispered.

The fingerprint men looked around and moved away from the table.

Damiot saw them now, the handsome man and the pretty girl, slumped together on a small yellow sofa.

The girl's hair was yellow. . . .

Damiot stared at the table—white damask, expensive crystal and silver. Untouched slices of *foie gras* had been removed from the plates in plastic envelopes for testing. The wine bottle had been taken from the silver ice bucket. Both wineglasses were gone.

The others, from the Préfecture, had departed with the removal of the bodies. Only the young magistrate's clerk, with his notebook, remained in the corridor with Graudin—and, of course, the restaurant staff.

"Celina? Would they arrive together for dinner?"

"They always came separately. Monsieur would phone during the afternoon to engage this same private room."

"What about after dinner? Did they leave together?"

"Mademoiselle would come downstairs first and walk toward the Champs Elysées. Monsieur would not appear for another ten minutes."

"How did they arrive tonight?"

"Mademoiselle first, as usual. From the restaurant, I noticed her getting out of a taxi and moved out of sight so she could reach the elevator without thinking she was observed. When Monsieur appeared, he stopped for a few words with the girl in our cloakroom. After he went upstairs I waited ten minutes before I sent Joseph up with menus. He's the waiter who always takes Monsieur Renant's dinner order."

"Could I speak to Joseph?"

"Certainly." Varny opened the door. "Joseph!"

Damiot saw the waiter step out of the group in the corridor, a thin, dark man, with graying hair, moving with a kind of graceful arrogance as he came into the private room. He motioned for the waiter to close the door. "Tell me, Joseph, what happened when you brought those menus up here tonight?"

"Everything was as usual, Monsieur Inspecteur."

“As usual?”

“Monsieur Varny was holding Mademoiselle’s hand. They were always very—affectionate. Even when I was present.”

“Did the girl seem troubled? Angry, perhaps?”

“She was smiling the whole time I discussed dinner with Monsieur.”

“What did they order?”

“Fresh *foie gras* to start. Then the *sole meunière* and—”

Damiot would have to question them, starting with the owner. Should he interrogate them in the corridor? More privacy here. They would talk more freely if the others didn’t listen.

Damiot swung the splintered door open. “Monsieur Varny?”

The man who came toward him was in his fifties, stout, with curly gray hair. He wore a dinner jacket. His round face was the sort that should be smiling but at the moment it was ashen and solemn.

“A few more questions, Monsieur.” Damiot bowed him inside, as though he were the host greeting a customer, and closed the door.

“The publicity will ruin me! If the newspapers say it was my food that poisoned them. . . .”

“Apparently they hadn’t eaten anything. Everything will, of course, be analyzed but I suspect the poison must have been in the wine.”

“Impossible! Lucien served a fresh bottle of Montrachet. There was no way it could have been poisoned!”

“I would guess the poison was placed in the wine after it was served.” He hesitated, standing beside Varny, facing the table and the yellow sofa. “How long had Monsieur Renant been a customer here?”

“Perhaps five years. . . .”

“And the young lady?”

“She appeared for the first time three weeks ago. Since then they dined together at least twice a week.”

“Had there been other—young ladies—with Monsieur Renant? Before this one?”

“At least a dozen! Most of them lasted about six months.”

“You told me earlier, this girl was named Duroy. . . .”

“Monsieur Renant called her Mademoiselle Duroy. Several of my staff have heard him call her Celina.”

“Specialty of the house!” Varny exclaimed.

“—for dessert,” Joseph continued, “the strawberry mousse.”

“And what was their mood when you served the first course?”

"I didn't serve them."

"Who did?"

"No one, Monsieur. I never return to a private room once I have taken the order. After Lucien, our sommelier, gets the wine order this door is locked from inside. Everything is sent upstairs in the dumbwaiter. Here. . ." He turned to the wall and raised a section of paneling, revealing a dark opening. "Most guests prefer to serve themselves."

"You didn't see them again after you took their dinner order?"

"Each course is placed on the dumbwaiter by a chef in the cellar. Tonight only the first course—the *foie gras*—was sent up."

"I brought the bottle from the wine cellar, uncorked it, placed it in the ice bucket and sent it upstairs in the dumbwaiter. Monsieur Renant always liked me to open the wine for him."

Damiot studied the sommelier's face as he explained what he had done. Features flushed from years of drinking, watery blue eyes, gray hair cut short. A big man, he looked to be in his late sixties, with a body that had gone to fat—white apron, around an ample waist, under his dinner jacket, a tasting cup hanging from a chain. "Tell me, Lucien, what was the wine?"

"A 1959 Montrachet. Monsieur Renant's favorite."

"Lucien's been with me six years!" Varny exclaimed. "In full charge of our cellars."

"There's no way," Damiot continued, "anyone could have put poison into the bottle before it reached this floor?"

"Impossible!" Lucien scowled, considering such an idea. "I waited until the dumbwaiter stopped, heard Monsieur Renant talking to the young lady as he removed the bottle, then rang the bell for me to lower the dumbwaiter. When it came down to the cellar it was empty."

"Did you hear what Renant was saying?"

"Not the words. Only his voice. He was laughing."

"Thank you, Lucien. That's all for the moment." He watched the dignified man open the door and step outside. Why did most sommeliers look like archbishops? Perhaps because the serving of wine was such a ritual. . .

"What have you learned, Monsieur Inspecteur?" Varny asked.

"It would seem that either Renant or the girl put the poison into

that bottle. When the other wasn't looking. But which?"

"Thank God no one can say it was my food!"

"Who broke this door open?"

"Joseph came upstairs when Monsieur Renant didn't take the *sole meunière* from the dumbwaiter. There was no response when Joseph knocked, so he returned downstairs for me. When I got no answer I told Joseph to break the door open. We found them so, the *foie gras* untouched but their wineglasses half-empty. . ."

Damiot waited, hat in hand, in the tiled foyer of the elegant apartment at the top of a building on Avenue Carnot.

He had left Graudin downstairs, half-asleep, in the police car.

As he glanced at the framed paintings, barely visible in the light from a shaded lamp, he wondered about André Renant, found dead, with a young girl, in a fashionable restaurant only half a dozen blocks away from where he lived. . .

"Madame Renant will receive you now."

He turned to see the maid, clutching a white summer robe to her plump breasts, wisps of black hair sticking out from plastic curlers.

"This way, M'sieur Inspecteur."

Damiot followed her through a dim corridor into a spacious salon, softly lighted, furnished with rare antiques.

A woman sat there on a sofa—a beautiful woman with gray hair and intelligent eyes, wearing an expensive-looking violet robe.

He bowed. "Madame. . ."

She didn't speak until the maid had left the room. "What has happened to my husband?"

"I regret that I must report your husband is dead."

Her head raised slightly. "An accident?"

"He was found in a private room of a certain restaurant—"

"Which restaurant?"

"La Belle Époque. On Avenue Matignon."

"Was André alone?"

"There was a girl with him. She, too, is dead."

"Then I suppose there will be a scandal." She hesitated, frowning, picking at the edge of her robe. "What caused their death?"

"I can't be certain until I have a report from the police lab. I suspect that there was poison in their wine."

"Who put it there?"

"Either your husband or the girl, I should think. Although no poison was found on their persons. No small bottle or anything like that."

"André would never take his own life. He wasn't the type. Tell me, Monsieur—who was this girl?"

"There was no identification in her handbag. Your husband called her Mademoiselle Duroy. Celina Duroy."

"One of his little playmates, I suppose. There have been many others. . . ."

"You knew about them?"

"For a long time, Monsieur. I never interfered with my husband's affairs as long as he always returned to me. We were in love—years ago—but since our children married and left us, André has sought other interests. I'm certain he realized that I knew but we have never discussed it."

"Was there any reason—financial problems, for instance—why your husband would take his own life?"

"None! His affairs were in excellent order. Two of our sons are in business with him. Textiles. . . ." She sighed. "I will have to call them and report what has happened. Tell me, Monsieur, was this girl pretty?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Poor thing. How very sad. . . ."

Damiot realized that he was weary as he left the apartment building and crossed the sidewalk toward the police car. His back was aching, his legs stiff from standing.

The interview with Madame Renant had lasted more than half an hour but he had learned nothing.

He opened the car door and sank into the seat next to Graudin.

"How'd it go?"

"She knew about her husband's little friends."

"You think she may have—"

"The maid says she didn't leave the apartment all evening."

"What now?"

"Nothing we can do until morning. Better take me home."

Damiot sat at his desk, staring at the hot sunlight flooding in through an open window. Two fat pigeons paraded on the dusty sill.

The lab report on his desk named the poison found in the two

wineglasses and the partially empty bottle. There would have been no odor or taste so the victim could have suspected nothing.

Madame Renant had been certain that her husband had no reason to take his life. But what if Renant loved this girl enough to take both their lives, knowing his wife would never consent to divorce?

Poison was, in most cases, a woman's weapon. Not always, though. . .

Why would the girl kill her lover? The waiter said they had been holding hands when he took their dinner order. The girl was smiling. . . Celina Duroy. The name sounded phony. . .

A young woman in Paris would have some identification in her handbag unless for some reason she didn't want her name to be known. Perhaps this girl had given Renant a false name when they first met. No Celina Duroy had been turned up in any official files.

Damiot scowled at the noisy pigeons.

He still didn't know which was the victim, which the murderer. The man or the girl?

He turned in response to a knock on his door. "Come in!"

Graudin entered, waving a slip of paper. "They've identified the girl's prints! Her name's not Duroy. It's Collard—Annie Collard."

"Does she have a record?"

"None that they could find. She's listed as an actress. . ."

Damiot grunted. "One of those!"

"I have an address for her. In Montparnasse. . ."

Damiot rose from the desk and reached for his hat. The startled pigeons fled from the windowsill.

Damiot pressed the bell button vigorously, eyeing the two names written on a small card thumbtacked to the door:

CELINA DUROY

NADIA NORVAL

"Both sound like actresses," Graudin muttered.

A muffled female voice asked from inside, "Who is it?"

"Mademoiselle Duroy lives here?"

"She's not home! Who wants to know?"

"Police Judiciaire. . ."

There was a moment of silence, then the door opened a few inches.

Damiot glimpsed a sleepy eye and bright red hair.

"How do I know you're police?"

Graudin held his badge up to the opening.

"Celina didn't come home last night."

Damiot moved closer. "Mademoiselle Dujoy is dead."

"Mon Dieu!"

The door opened and they saw that she was young and pretty. She was wrapped in a robe that had seen better nights, and her feet were bare. The red hair looked genuine.

"You wakened me. Did you say Celina's dead?"

"She was found last night in a private room of a restaurant—La Belle Époque—with a man."

"Monsieur Renant?"

"They had both been poisoned."

"Poor Celina!" She moved back from the door. "Come in, if you wish."

Damiot followed her into a pleasant studio with a tall window overlooking a small garden. Through an open door he saw an unmade bed. "Mademoiselle Norval?"

"That's right." She sank onto a small sofa. "How was Celina poisoned?"

"It was in her wine."

"I don't understand. Celina never drank anything! Not even a glass of wine. Oh, of course, last night she had something to celebrate. She'd gotten a job yesterday, in a new film. . . Did Renant kill her?"

"We've no idea who killed either of them as yet."

"He wouldn't do such a thing! I know he wouldn't. They were in love. Truly in love! Celina's never been so happy."

"She was an actress?"

"We're both actresses. Celina's done small parts in films and on the stage. Her best break was last year. Some American director took her to Spain for a film, but the part was small, and the director went back to Hollywood. Then, last month, she met Renant."

"Where did they meet?"

"Some party. I don't remember who gave it. She'd seen him before, of course. Knew about him. That he liked young actresses."

"Renant gave her money?"

"He—helped her."

"Did they quarrel?"

"Never! Celina wasn't like that. She was sweet and affectionate. And

loyal. We couldn't have lived together if she hadn't been, because I'm just the opposite. Always quarreling. Except I could never argue with Celina. She wouldn't let me! And now she's dead!"

"Her real name was Annie Collard?"

"You know about that? She changed her name when she left home to become an actress. Her mother didn't approve."

"Where will I find her mother? She has to be notified."

"She lives in Montmartre."

"The address?"

"I'll get it." Adjusting her robe as she got to her feet, she went to a table where a telephone protruded from a clutter of objects. "Celina never saw her mother." She picked up an address book as she talked and flipped the pages. "They still don't get along. You know how it is—mothers suspect the worst." She found the page. "Her mother lives on rue Cortot. Top floor. I've never been there but it's near Place du Tertre."

"I know the street. What's the number?"

"Number fifteen. She doesn't have a phone. . . ."

Damiot was breathing heavily when he reached the top floor, his assistant clumping behind, and knocked on a door with the numeral 15 painted, in fading black, on the scabrous wood.

"At least we won't get this one out of bed," Graudin murmured. . .

Damiot knocked again.

"Coming. . . ."

They stepped back as the door opened.

"What do you want?" A gray-haired woman, eyes blinking, clutched a cheap kimono over her scrawny body.

"Police Judiciaire," Damiot answered. "Madame Collard?"

"If that old fool says I swiped his cheese he's a liar!"

"We've come about your daughter, Annie. . . ."

"That worthless girl! Bad as her father! What's she done now?"

"Madame—your daughter is dead."

"Annie?" Tears welled from her eyes and ran down the gaunt cheeks. "No! That's impossible!" She turned back, away from the door, as though she had forgotten them. "Annie can't be. . . ."

Following her into the small attic room, Damiot noticed a nearly empty bottle of red wine on the floor beside a rumpled bed. He waited

until she had slumped onto a wooden chair. "When did you see your daughter last?"

"More than a year ago. Can you tell me—what killed her?"

"Your daughter was poisoned."

"Murdered?"

"We're trying to find out."

"How was she poisoned?"

"We think it was in a glass of wine."

"Wine? Annie never drank wine. Or anything else! Because of her father's drinking, she never touched anything. Where is she?"

"At the morgue. You won't be able to remove the body until this investigation is finished."

"I have no money. . ."

"Something will be arranged. What can you tell me about your daughter?"

"Nothing. I've only seen her twice since she ran off. Deserted me! Four years ago. Just like her father."

"Where is her father?"

"Haven't seen Collard in nine years. Annie was only twelve when he left us."

"Was that in Paris?"

"We'd been here a year. Collard brought us from Marseilles. He always had jobs there but it was much harder after we came to Paris. He began to drink more."

"What sort of work did your husband do?" He saw her glance toward the wine bottle on the floor, moistening her lips with her tongue.

"When I met him he was a boxer—I was a waitress in those days—but after he lost several fights because of his drinking, he had to go to work for a wine merchant. Then, for a while, he was a waiter. Mostly waterfront cafés. But he couldn't hold any job for long because of his temper. Always arguing and fighting. Always drinking. . . When we came to Paris he worked as a valet in one of the big hotels. Things were better for a while but then he was fired for stealing."

"Was he guilty?"

"I suppose." She shrugged. "He'd been mixed up with things like that in Marseilles, which is why we came to Paris. He'd promised me he would behave, but after he got fired from that hotel he couldn't find another steady job. Only substitute work as a waiter around Pigalle."

He began drinking and fighting again, losing his temper and arguing with the customers. Then one night he didn't come home. I never heard from him again." Her thin body sagged with fatigue as she talked. "I used to be a waitress but now all I can get is night jobs—cleaning offices. That's why I was asleep when you knocked."

"What's your husband's first name?"

"Michel—Michel Collard. That's his real name. On our marriage papers."

"I am sorry, Madame. About your daughter."

"Annie wasn't a bad girl. Only wanted to better herself. Always talking about being an actress. . . ."

"I'll be in touch with you—" —he turned toward the door, motioning Graudin ahead—"when we know something more." As he followed his assistant into the hall he sensed the woman behind him reaching for her wine bottle.

Damiot sat at his desk, perspiring in the noonday heat, staring into space.

There was an unfinished ham sandwich that had been sent in from a nearby café. After climbing those steps to the Renant woman's attic, puffing from his exertion, he had forced himself not to eat the whole sandwich. He still felt hungry, and that made him irritable.

In front of him was a report on Michel Collard. He had studied the typed words several times.

Collard had a long record of petty thefts in Marseilles. He'd been an amateur boxer, frequently involved in waterfront brawls. He had spent short periods behind bars, but nothing serious.

In Paris there was no record of any hotel theft. Obviously that incident hadn't been reported to the police.

Several fights in Pigalle bars. The Marseilles pattern, repeated in Paris. . . .

For the past nine years there was no record on Collard. He must have departed from Paris when he left his family, but not back to Marseilles because they had no recent dossier on him.

Damiot's eyes focused on the windowsill. No pigeons in sight. He sat there perspiring, searching for some clue. . . .

He stared at the Montrachet bottle that Graudin had brought from the lab, sitting on his desk in its plastic envelope.

They had found one set of prints on the bottle. Renant's prints . . . Did that mean he murdered the girl and took his own life? But for what possible reason?

A wealthy man like Renant would never kill his beautiful young mistress. That Norval girl said that Annie Collard was loyal and affectionate. Never argued or quarreled. . . And she didn't drink!

From time to time during the afternoon he got to his feet and walked around the small office, pausing at the window for a breath of fresh air.

His telephone rang occasionally, but none of the calls had anything to do with the deaths at La Belle Époque.

Damiot phoned his wife and told her he would probably be home for dinner. He set the phone down and scowled at the Montrachet bottle.

Wait a moment! What if Michel Collard was a waiter at La Belle Époque? The sommelier said the 1959 Montrachet was Renant's favorite. . .

A waiter could have known that Renant had reserved that private room last night. A waiter would have had an opportunity to put the poison in the wine bottle while the sommelier went to get the ice and silver bucket for the wine. . .

That arrogant waiter had moved with the grace of a former boxer! It was he who broke open the door to that private dining room. What was his name? Joseph!

Could Joseph be Michel Collard? Changed his name when he got a job in a fancy restaurant? Maybe that's what Collard had been doing for the past nine years since he deserted his family—worked as a waiter! Making his way higher and higher in the smart restaurants of Paris. Probably had another wife now. Maybe children. . .

When he saw his daughter in that private room, he was afraid she might recognize him and ruin his new life. . .

The girl had been eating at the restaurant for the past three weeks! Perhaps she didn't recognize her father at first, but recently had shown him that she knew who he was. Some private signal. . .

Joseph was Michel Collard! That's who had poisoned the wine! He would question him, but first he would speak to the sommelier. Find out whether he had noticed anything odd about that wine bottle. . .

Damiot brought out a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wrapped it around the bottle of Montrachet so that he wouldn't disturb

Renant's fingerprints, using one corner to cover the white plastic stopper before he eased it out.

The bottle was more than half full.

He raised it to his nose and inhaled the aroma. The lab had said the poison was tasteless and odorless.

Damiot straightened in his chair.

He sniffed the mouth of the bottle again, breathing deeply. It was not a Montrachet! The lab report had said white wine. Only a connoisseur would know it wasn't a Montrachet!

That waiter, Joseph, wasn't Michel Collard!

Damiot pushed the plastic stopper into the bottle and returned it to the plastic envelope. Snatching up the telephone he jabbed the intercom button.

"Yes, sir?"

"Graudin! I want a car. We're going back to that restaurant."

La Belle Époque was only dimly lighted as Damiot hurried inside ahead of his assistant.

Two young waiters, preparing the empty tables, looked around.

"Is Monsieur Varny on the premises?" Damiot asked.

"In the kitchen, Monsieur. One moment. . . ." The waiter disappeared through a swinging door.

"What do you suppose it would cost to eat dinner here?" Graudin whispered.

"More than we can afford, mon ami!" He saw the owner hurry out from the kitchen. "Monsieur Varny. . . ."

"I read the evening paper!" He came toward them, between the rows of immaculate tables. "Two mysterious deaths, they said, in a fashionable restaurant. At least they didn't say which one!"

"I'd like to speak to your sommelier again."

"Lucien?"

"I want to ask him about that wine he served last night."

"Our staff's eating dinner in the kitchen. We open in another hour."

"This won't take long. Could I see him in that same private room?"

"Door's open. I was told not to have the lock repaired." Varny led them to the elevator and pushed the metal door back. "Second floor."

"Thank you, Monsieur." He stepped into the mirrored cage followed by Graudin.

"Will you need me upstairs?" Varny asked.

"Not at the moment."

"Vôtre service, Monsieur Inspecteur." Varny closed the door.

Damiot pressed the button and the elevator began to rise.

"What do you want me to do?" Graudin asked.

"Stay in the corridor, in case I need you. If Varny comes upstairs see that he doesn't get too close to the door. I don't want him to hear what's said inside."

"I understand." The elevator came to a stop and he slid the door open.

Damiot stepped out first into the empty corridor, where a soft glow from a crystal chandelier warmed the gray-green paneled walls.

He examined the splintered wood near the lock before he pushed the door open, saw that the private diningroom was dark and fingered the paneling until he touched a wall switch.

Shaded sconces came alive.

The tiny diningroom was unchanged.

Damiot closed the door and, after a moment's hesitation, circled the table to sit on the yellow sofa, facing the door.

He saw that the panel was closed over the dumbwaiter.

Renant had left this sofa and walked there to get the wine bottle in its ice bucket, and the two plates of *foie gras*.

Or had the girl done that? No—her prints hadn't been on the bottle, only on her glass.

So Renant brought the bottle to the table, sat beside the girl and filled both their glasses with wine.

They had probably drunk a toast. Both glasses had been more than half empty.

He wondered how many other men had dined in this private room with beautiful young girls. One of the oldest restaurants in Paris—rich men had been bringing their mistresses here for more than a hundred years. . .

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" He watched the door open, saw the sommelier, white apron around his waist, tasting cup hanging from its chain.

"You wish to see me, M'sieur Inspecteur?"

"A few more questions. . ." He waited until Graudin, outside, closed the door.

The sommelier faced him, waiting.

Damiot breathed deeply before he spoke. "You are Michèl Collard."

The heavy body seemed to sag.

"You killed them. Renant and your daughter."

"Yes, M'sieur Inspecteur. I killed them."

"Why? Do you have another wife now? Children?"

"I never married again, although there is a woman. I've been happier with her than I ever was with my wife. . . ."

"Your daughter recognized you? She was going to ruin this new life of yours! Was that it?"

"No. Annie had no idea I was her father. She never looked at me. I was only the sommelier."

Damiot studied him—the flushed face, the boxer's body that had gone to fat. He realized that Collard had been drinking. "Why did you kill them?"

"I've seen hundreds of men bring girls to this room. I knew what happened after the door was locked. Monsieur Renant had brought many other young women here. Then three weeks ago, he brought my daughter for the first time. I recognized her right away because she looked like her mother! It was agony for me each time I knew they were in this room together, the door locked. . . I started drinking. First time in years! And I planned how to kill him. Not my daughter! Annie was a good girl. She said she never drank, the first night she came here. Her glass was never used. I checked each time after they left. . . ." He began to sob softly. "I didn't mean to kill my daughter! I thought she wouldn't touch the wine. . . ."

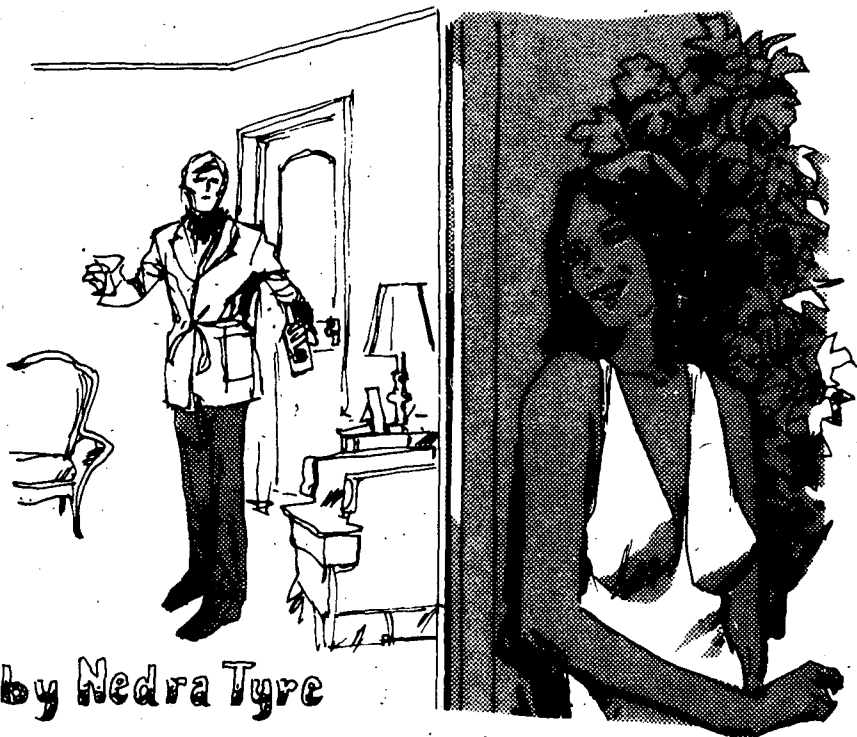
"She had gotten a job yesterday. I suppose she told Renant and he persuaded her, this once, to drink a toast. To her new job. . . ."

"How did you know, M'sieur, that I did it?"

"First of all, your fingerprints should have been on the wine bottle. You wiped them off—because of your guilt! Also, you wouldn't waste a vintage wine. You emptied the Montrachet—probably drank it yourself—filled the bottle with a very ordinary Chablis before you added the poison. Only a sommelier would do that!"

From the time she was a little girl she had dreamed of celebrating her golden anniversary with her one and only predestined mate. . .

Accidental Widow



by Nedra Tyre

The gun in Millie's right hand fired.

Si didn't even have time to look surprised.

He fell dead at her feet.

"Damn," Millie said softly. It wasn't fair that she had lost another husband.

She hadn't wanted the silly gun to begin with. She'd begged Si not to give it to her—his name was Simon but he liked for people to call

ACCIDENTAL WIDOW

him Si. Her protests were brushed aside. Si had insisted she must learn to shoot. He was the bossiest and most stubborn of all her husbands. He had put his foot down. Millie had to know how to handle a gun expertly so that she could defend herself. Si's job kept him out of town on business more and more and it wasn't safe for Millie (whose real name was Millicent) to be alone in their country place unless she had ample protection, which meant she had to be able to shoot an intruder.

Millie's dread of guns, revolvers, pistols—whatever they were called—was phobic. Rather than have a pistol in the house she begged Si to let her travel with him so she could have his continuous protection. Si wouldn't think of it. He wouldn't let Millie sacrifice her pleasant life to trail along with him.

So, in spite of anything that Millie could do, Si had bought the gun or pistol or revolver or whatever it was and proceeded to give her her first lesson. "Look, darling," he had said, "this is the way you release the catch," and he had done it with considerable grace and had handed the gun to her to repeat his action. The instant Millie touched the gun it went off.

Poor dear Archibald—he wanted people to call him Arch—had had an equally abrupt demise. He was crazy about the water. Her Uncle Adam said Arch should have been born with fins—or was it gills?—he was so foolish about water.

Millie was terrified of water. She had few fears. Lightning didn't frighten her and she thought that mice were cute. She was even fond of snakes. But she didn't like water. That is, she didn't like wide expanses of it. Swimming in small enclosed pools was pleasant enough. She would never have ventured outside the United States if she'd lived in a time when one had to travel by ship. Arch doted on water, and Millie encouraged him to spend as much of his leisure as he liked at the lake. She just requested politely that he not ask her to join him in his boat—she would gladly sit on the shore and watch him row and wave at him.

But that wasn't enough for Arch. He was determined to cure her of her fear of the water and rationalized it so that her fear and her love for him were somehow the same, and if she didn't get in the boat with him it meant she didn't love him. When he put it like that, what could she do?

So she had gingerly climbed into the boat and even as they edged away from the dock she begged and pleaded with Arch to take her back. She was literally out of her mind from fear. Arch laughed at her, and her fear became so great that she had decided to leap into the water and to drown herself to kill her fear. She had stood up and Arch had risen and was reaching toward her and she pushed him away.

Suddenly there was a splash, and she was alone and began to scream.

People nearby heard and rowed toward her and she told them about Arch and they dived and summoned other help.

But nothing helped Arch. It took four hours for them to find his body.

Jonathan was the next one. At least as Millie recalled it he was the one she had married after Arch. Jonathan wanted people to call him Jon, and spell it J-o-n. He got very peeved with Millie's mother because she always wrote of him or to him as John. He said that Millie's mother was the most wonderful mother-in-law a man could wish for, but why did she insist on spelling his name John instead of Jon? Poor lamb, there wasn't much time left to him in which Millie's mother could misspell his name.

Jon was mad for picnics. But of a very primitive sort. Millie agreed that picnics had their place. She loved it when you took a folding table and chairs and a small tent and cushions and silver and napkins and a feast of chicken breasts and ham accompanied by plenty of iced champagne. Um.

But Jon was all for living off the land. A picnic was no picnic, he claimed, unless you gathered what you ate. It was the way you showed your mettle.

On their last picnic he had gone fishing while he left it up to Millie to gather the mushrooms and wild strawberries for the rest of the meal. She didn't know beans about selecting mushrooms and told him so, and he explained very carefully what she must look for and what she must avoid. She tried to obey his instructions, but she hadn't brought her glasses. Jon disliked it when she wore glasses. He acted as if it were some fashionable whim of hers to wear glasses and that she didn't need them at all. So without her glasses she had done the best she could in picking mushrooms and strawberries.

Jon had come back flourishing the fish he had caught, and he and

Millie had settled down to drinking bourbon straight from the bottle as an appetizer. They did not spare themselves and in a little while became as giggly and exuberant as children. They discovered they were ravenously hungry and had rushed about gathering wood for a fire and had buried the fish near the embers and Jon had begun to eat the mushrooms. Millie didn't like raw vegetables and had deadened her appetite with some of the wild strawberries, and Jon had kept dipping into the mushrooms while the fish took its time about being cooked.

Most of the mushrooms had been good, but enough of them had been poisonous to end Jon's short and (Millie was sure) happy life.

Then there was Pen—short for Pendleton. Millie could cry her eyes out when she thought about what had happened to him. If only Pen had stood a bare inch—or even a fraction of an inch to the right or left, forward or backward—the bust would not have struck him at the exact spot on his skull which had proved fatal.

Pen had wanted to be an interior designer, but his father had put his foot down, and instead Pen had worked in a bank. After he had married Millie his flair for design had erupted all over the house, especially in the main hall. He had no sooner completed the hall in regency style than he wanted it Victorian or modern, and then his most ambitious scheme was to make it classical and have the theme extend all the way upstairs and across the balustrade on the landing, where he proposed to set half a dozen busts of various Roman emperors to complement another half dozen set on pedestals in the lower hall. His sketch of the completed design which he presented for Millie's approval looked impressive if somewhat forbidding. Soon various deliverymen staggered in beneath monstrously heavy busts which they deployed according to Pen's directions.

Then one doom-laden night not long afterward, Millie had gone upstairs and Pen had called to her from directly below the landing to ask her to put on her blue satin nightgown and she had leaned over to blow him a kiss and to say all right, darling, and had somehow sent Gaius Julius Caesar tumbling from his perch.

Her parents, as always, were wonderful and sympathetic and stood by Millie faithfully, though when her poor mother learned of Pen's mishap with the bust of Gaius Julius Caesar she tactfully explained a somewhat awkward development.

"Millie, dear," her mother said, "I'm just as embarrassed as I can

be, and I don't want to sound inhospitable—it breaks my heart to have to mention it—but there's simply no room for Pen in the family plot. You see, darling, your Uncle Adam and Aunt Bess, your grandfather, and daddy and I—and of course you, baby—have got to be buried there, and though we've been more than happy to accommodate your husbands up to now, there's just no space for Pen.”

So at the last minute Millie had to bustle about buying a cemetery lot and the only one available was way across the river.

After the service was over she felt so sad about leaving Pen out there all alone.

As it happened he did not have to wait very long for company.

Al, whose name was Aloysius, was just as bullheaded that she play softball as Jon had been that they picnic off the food they gathered.

Al was a sports enthusiast. Millie didn't like sports. Oh, she thought, it was nice enough to watch tennis if she had a seat in the shade, and she had been to lots of high school and college football games—twice she'd been homecoming queen. But she didn't like to participate in sports. She blistered too quickly and sprained too easily and she was too nearsighted to see a ball until it had almost struck her in the face. Al paid no attention to her protests and he listed their names as a participating husband-and-wife couple for a softball game at the club.

And there Millie was, standing at bat, completely a fish out of water, and Al was behind her saying, “Strike it, sweetheart. Give a big strong swing. Come on.” And she had swung with all her might, and with such a display of force that she had pivoted before she could stop herself and had struck Al. He had collapsed in a dead heap.

Not that anything really good came of that awful afternoon, but at least Millie hadn't struck Joe Moore who had been playing catch or whatever you call the person standing behind the batter. Joe had been playing at that position until Al had asked to take his place while Millie was at bat. Just suppose Joe had still been there when Millie had tried to strike the ball! Mary Moore would never have forgiven Millie if she had killed Joe.

Of course it was all just a terrible accident and Millie had only been trying to please Al when she hit him instead of the ball.

So Al went to join Pen in the new cemetery lot.

Lucky for Millie, other men didn't seem to lose heart—at least up to now. She heard her grandfather mutter about fortune hunters swarm-

ing around Millie like flies around a sugar bowl. But that really wasn't very kind of Grandpa, for even though it was true that none of the men she had married had any money to speak of, they were attractive and loving and had good jobs. It turned out that they had left her tidy sums after all, as her father had seen to it when he approved their engagements that they carried sizable amounts of life insurance, and accidental deaths paid double. And you didn't have to pay inheritance tax on insurance. So if her husbands had been hunting fortunes, she had been the one who had actually found them.

Her next husband was Gar—his real name was Beauregard.

Gar was the most affectionate man Millie had ever known. There was always a glint in Gar's eye, whatever the season—not that she had him for many seasons. While he was relatively composed when he drank scotch, bourbon or vodka, he could sometimes be a bit of a handful when he had gin. So Millie purposely did not buy gin when she shopped for liquor, except when she gave a big party and there were others besides Gar to drink it.

One afternoon her Uncle Adam came out to visit and he brought gin because he said martinis were the world's most civilized drink and he hadn't seen them served in Millie's house since she had married Gar. Uncle Adam stood by admiringly as Millie mixed martinis exactly to his specification. He was almost her favorite relative and his visit seemed much too short. She begged him to take his bottle of gin when he left, but he wouldn't hear of it.

Gar arrived from work as Millie lingered at the door saying goodbye to Uncle Adam and by the time her uncle had departed Gar had fastened upon the gin with rabid enthusiasm.

Hoping that food would deflect Gar, Millie had dashed into the kitchen and asked the cook and butler to serve dinner early, and they had gladly obliged, but for every ounce of beef that Gar consumed he took two ounces of gin.

The glint in Gar's eyes was at its most glinted.

Good gracious, Millie was still in her street clothes and eager for dessert—apple dumpling made from her Aunt Bess's recipe—and as soon as she had finished eating she intended to watch the evening news.

Her plans were in jeopardy.

Millie hadn't seen such fervor in Gar since their wedding night or at

least since the last time Gar had drunk lavishly of gin. He ignored his apple dumpling. Millie was halfway through hers and intent on eating Gar's if he didn't settle down and behave himself. Gar splashed more gin into a glass and then ran upstairs to the sitting room, and called out for her to follow him onto the balcony to look at the full moon.

Like a pirate Millie grabbed and gobbled Gar's apple dumpling and then went upstairs to the balcony where Gar was standing, gesturing dramatically toward the full moon. Some of the gin spilled from his glass to the bed of verbena below. With a damn or two he regretted the loss of the gin and rushed back downstairs to replenish his drink.

That part of the balcony on which Millie was standing was curtained from the moonlight by heavy vines, and she turned to watch Gar re-enter the sitting room. The almost empty bottle of gin was in his hand. He started to pour the gin into his glass, and then instead he leaned his head back and drank from the bottle, and with a yell of pleasure threw the empty bottle through the open door. The bottle arched past Millie and she waited for it to crash on the paved patio, but there was only a thud. Its fall had been muffled by the shrubbery and the bed of verbena.

"Where's my girl?" Gar asked. "Where's my darling girl?"

He sounded so sweet, so pleading, and it wasn't his fault that Uncle Adam had left the bottle of gin. And he probably had had a hard day at the office and needed to unwind and, for heaven's sake, what was wrong with a little horseplay? Husbands had to be cherished and encouraged. Their moods must be pampered.

Millie giggled and said, "I'm here but you can't find me."

Sure enough, Gar couldn't find her, so she darted out from the shadows to tease him, and he tried to grab her but she escaped to the other side of the balcony. Then Gar dashed after her, and somehow or other he crashed over the slender iron railing.

Fate was not as kind to Gar as it had been to the empty gin bottle. Neither the shrubbery nor the verbena bed deterred his fall. Gar fell directly onto the patio pavement.

And so Millie's life proceeded while all around her men were losing theirs.

Some of her marriages had lasted only a few months.

Her marriage to Adelbert—or Bert as he liked to be called—had lasted a year. As in the case of each of her marriages, she would have

been content for it to last throughout eternity. And if it hadn't been for the pills, Bert would be beside her at that very moment.

Bert was as silly as Gar—no, it wasn't Gar, Gar had loved her glasses—but Bert and one of the others whose name she couldn't remember at the moment hated it that she had to wear glasses to see anything clearly at all. Bert was so stern. He said she was perfect, that she mustn't mar her lovely face by wearing glasses, and she did her best to please him, just as she did her best to please all her husbands, though she thought it was silly of Bert not to let her wear glasses in his presence. She'd read that half the people in the United States wore glasses, and why shouldn't she?

So in a way what happened to Bert served him right.

No, that was too awful a way to put it.

Anyhow, Bert really did dramatize his illness—everyone, including his own mother and Millie's mother, said so.

Why he'd had a heart attack in the first place was unaccountable. No man only 26 years old had any business having a serious heart attack. Bert had been released from intensive care in the hospital to bedrest at home, and Millie had taken over nursing him. During his convalescence he acted like a spoiled brat—that was the only adequate term for his behavior. He made Millie cater to him day and night.

Late one afternoon she had fallen asleep exhausted as she sat beside him, and he waked her by jabbing at her and screaming that he had to have his pills. She hadn't had her glasses and had fumbled in the drawer and had given him the pillbox right in front, and it turned out they weren't the pills he should have taken.

As far as Millie could tell, the doctor didn't even realize what had happened. He comforted her by saying that a man in Bert's condition could die at any moment.

In that lapse of time after Bert died, Millie had an interval to think of everything that had happened to her and her husbands.

She got her husbands confused, she must admit, no matter how conscientiously she tried to keep them separate and distinct. She recalled that she had sent a large contribution to the alumni fund of Tech in honor of Gar, when she remembered too late that it was Bert who had gone to Tech. Not that it mattered to Tech—they kept the contribution and wrote a warm if somewhat vague acknowledgment. Once she had made a sizable donation to the SPCA to mark Jon's birthday, only to

recall that Jon didn't care at all for animals—it was Arch who had been the animal lover: during the brief extent of their marriage the size of their menagerie vied with that of the city zoo. Besides, it hadn't been Jon's birthday but Al's.

And she would attribute in memory some exquisite nuance of lovemaking to Si only to have to contradict herself later that it had actually been Pen. She would recollect the transports she had experienced in Paris with Gar, when she had never been to Paris with any of them but Arch, and she mooned in retrospect over Venice with Jon when in fact she had been with Al when she had fed all those pigeons in St. Mark's Square.

Never mind. She meant no disrespect to any of them because she couldn't keep track of what had happened to her with whom. She had cherished them all. It wasn't her fault that she had ended up with so many. From the time she was a little girl and had learned about husbands and weddings she had dreamed of celebrating her golden anniversary with her one and only predestined mate.

But life hadn't worked out that way.

Millie was years short of being thirty and she had had—well, exactly how many husbands was it?

She ticked them off.

Thumb, left hand—Bert.

First finger—Jon.

Second finger—Arch.

Third finger—Gar.

Little finger—Si.

Thumb, right hand—Pen.

Six—not that she had them in the right order. Six husbands! Only think of it. Why, it boggled the mind!

But just a minute. What did she mean—six husbands? She had forgotten Al. How could Al have slipped her mind? He was one of her favorites.

Al. First finger, right hand.

Al made seven.

Darling men, all of them. That was the only possible way she could describe them. She had been the luckiest woman in the whole world.

And the unluckiest.

What now?

Life had ended for her, she felt it in her bones. She was positive that no man would ever approach her again in a romantic way. Anybody who knew her story would think twice before he came courting, no matter what her Grandpa had said about her fortune being like a sugar bowl to attract flies.

She longed to speak of her doubts and misgivings with someone. If only she could discuss her anxieties. But the more often she had married, and the more often her husbands had died, the less her family and friends had seemed inclined to talk about Millie's unusual situation. It was almost as if they were embarrassed by what had happened to her, as if it were too indelicate to mention. They were the soul of tact, hovering over her with love and sympathy but ignoring her pressing and acute problem—which was the necessity to talk with someone about all her tragic losses.

The prolonged ringing of the doorbell interrupted her self-pity.

Her caller was a handsome, very tall man. And he was old. He must have been forty, at least. Her husbands had all been her own age, give or take a year. So this couldn't be anyone intent on matrimony.

"Mrs. Raymond?"

He had come to the wrong place.

"Mrs. Raymond?" He repeated it as if Millie hadn't understood him.

"Mrs. Raymond?" he said for the third time.

The last repetition brought Millie to her senses.

Good gracious, one of her husbands had the last name of Raymond. Of course! It was Bert, poor darling. His last name was Raymond.

The last name of her last husband was Raymond, so of course it was her last last name. She had had so many last names. How could she be expected to keep up with them all?

Millie nodded to the man.

"My name is Williams. May I come in?"

Millie nodded again.

Williams did not give his first name. Or his profession. Or his rank.

He was the lieutenant in charge of the Queenborough Homicide Squad. He purposely did not divulge any information about himself. Nothing about this visit must get back to headquarters just yet. He had wanted to make a routine aboveboard investigation. For some time he had longed to bring Millicent Raymond to account for her crimes. After the third accidental death he had approached the chief, who waved

him aside. The chief knew Millicent Raymond's grandfather and father intimately. There wasn't a finer family in the South—in the world if it came to that, he said—and Millicent was the pride of the family.

After the fifth accidental death Williams made another attempt to get an investigation under way and the chief's blood really did boil. What was eating Williams anyway? He must stop his foolish suspicions and get down to punishing the real criminals. Weren't there enough murderers loose on the streets of Queenborough to satisfy him? How dare he think of accusing an innocent girl?

What was eating Williams then and what had kept eating Williams was a very healthy sense of justice. What was eating Williams was honest outrage that a clever murderess was free to decimate the young manhood of Queenborough.

Well, seven murders were enough, and he would put a stop to it.

So there Williams was at Millicent Raymond's front door. He really hadn't known what to expect—perhaps someone whose guilt would be apparent at first glance—but Millicent Raymond's lovely face was unmarred by guilt. There were no circles under her eyes and he was sure she slept like a baby. Her tiny hands impressed him. Those dainty, delicate little fingers had short rounded nails like a child's, and yet they had sent seven good men to their deaths. He wondered if she had portraits and snapshots of her husbands. It would take a trophy room, and a big one at that, to accommodate photographs of them all.

She was beautiful, he would admit, and seemingly unconscious of her charm. It was easy to understand how all those poor bastards had fallen in love with her.

Williams was positive she would betray herself, and with the lapse of every moment in her presence he became more positive. Words tumbled out of her mouth as if she had too long repressed her terrible crimes. She seemed grateful to be at last able to talk freely about her husbands. No doubt assailed him, he was sure he would have her confession before the afternoon was over.

Millie was very much won over by her unexpected caller.

This was what she had been longing for, someone to whom she could unburden herself. What truly touched her was all the information Mr. Williams had about her husbands. Why, it was uncanny. Even she—much less her parents and Grandpa and Uncle Adam and Aunt Bess—couldn't keep her husbands in proper sequence. Mr. Williams had no

trouble at all. He even contradicted her when she put Al before Si or whoever it was. He seemed almost to cling to every word she said, and every now and then he took out a notebook and jotted something in it.

And he was so interested in the house—not that that was unusual since it was old and famous and people swarmed to it every time it was open for a benefit or for the spring and Christmas garden tours. ✓

Mr. Williams showed marked curiosity in exactly who had died where, and yet he seemed wary. He leaped back when he had stood in the front hall beneath the balustrade as if what had happened to poor darling Pen might happen to him, though all those Roman emperors had been donated to the museum in Pen's memory two days after his funeral.

Mr. Williams was timid, too, about going out on the balcony from which poor darling Gar, absolutely loaded with gin, had plunged. He apparently thought that he, too, might accidentally fall.

A thunderstorm had been in the making since a short while after lunch and the house grew darker and darker. Millie turned on the lamps. Strong gusts made the outside shutters beat against the house and Millie excused herself to go close the shutters and windows. Mr. Williams gallantly offered to help, but he kept his distance from Millie, always cannily gauging where she was before he turned his back on her and leaned out a window to draw in and latch the blinds.

Lightning struck nearby and the lights went out. There was no telling when they would come back on. It didn't matter, Millie loved candlelight. Sometimes she thought the house was at its prettiest and most romantic when it was lit by candles. She handed a candlestick to Mr. Williams and lighted a candle for herself and they continued their rounds of closing shutters and windows against the storm.

When Millie and Mr. Williams went down the back stairs they were both offended by a strong smell of gas.

"It's from the basement," Millie said. "The wind must have blown out the flame for the water heater."

Williams snuffed his candle and ordered Millie to blow out hers. "Stay out of the way," he said, "and keep the door to the basement open."

Then he groped down the dark, narrow steps.

Mr. Williams was so masterful, so completely in command, barking orders like a drill sergeant. He sent little thrills up and down Millie's

spine.

Blow out that candle! Stay out of the way! Keep the door to the basement open!

Just for a second Millie imagined that he had been overcome by fumes and she had rushed to his rescue, leaning over him giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

It was all so romantic—like a Gothic novel, really—an old historic mansion far, far out in the country besieged by a storm, a mysterious stranger alone with the trusting heroine. And she was the heroine. Goodness, how thrilling.

A sharp noise ended her fantasy.

Mr. Williams must not have got to the heater on time. Something had set off the escaping gas and there had been an explosion. All was lost. The house would burn to the ground, leaving only the chimneys standing to make a pathetic yet wonderfully romantic landscape.

Then she realized that there hadn't been an explosion. A gust from the basement had slammed the door shut at the head of the stairwell outside the kitchen. Millie was neglecting her duties—Mr. Williams had ordered her to keep that door open.

She dashed to the door and hurled it open with all her might.

What happened in that instant was something that couldn't possibly have happened in a million years. Yet it did happen. Just as Millie swung the door back Mr. Williams had sprinted to the top of the stairs to do the same thing and the door struck him a brutal and savage blow.

He fell backward, down, down, down the steep steps and died instantly when his head smashed against the brick floor of the basement.

Millie was devastated.

What a terrible, terrible thing to happen to such a nice man. But in a manner of speaking something like this had happened to her so often that she knew exactly what to do. In the case of an accidental death she must summon the authorities and touch nothing.

As she hurried to the telephone she thought how strange it was that she didn't know Mr. Williams' full name. And he had known every single one of hers, one right after the other.

"You know," Kaprelian said, "I thought you were headed for Skid Row or an early grave . . ."

Putting the **PIECES** Back

by Bill Pronzini



You wouldn't think a man could change completely in four months—but when Kaprelian saw Fred DeBeque come walking into the Drop Back Inn, he had living proof that it could happen. He was so startled, in fact, that he just stood there behind the plank and stared with his mouth hanging open.

It had been a rainy off-Monday exactly like this one the last time he'd seen DeBeque, and that night the guy had been about as low as

you could get and carrying a load big enough for two. Now he was dressed in a nice tailored suit, looking sober and normal as though he'd never been through any heavy personal tragedy. Kaprelian felt this funny sense of flashback come over him, like the entire last seven months hadn't even existed.

He didn't much care for feelings like that, and he shook it off. Then he smiled kind of sadly as DeBeque walked over and took his old stool, the one he'd sat on every night for the three months after he had come home from work late one afternoon and found his wife bludgeoned to death.

Actually, Kaprelian was glad to see the change in him. He hadn't known DeBeque or DeBeque's wife very well before the murder; they were just people who lived in the neighborhood and dropped in once in a while for a drink. He'd liked them both though, and he'd gotten to know Fred pretty well afterward, while he was doing all that boozing. That was why the change surprised him as much as it did. He'd been sure DeBeque would turn into a Skid Row bum or a corpse, the way he put down the sauce; a man couldn't drink like that more than maybe a year without ending up one or the other.

The thing was, DeBeque and his wife really loved each other. He'd been crazy for her, worshipped the ground she walked on—Kaprelian had never loved anybody that way, so he couldn't really understand it. Anyhow, when she'd been murdered DeBeque had gone all to pieces. Without her, he'd told Kaprelian a few times, he didn't want to go on living himself; but he didn't have the courage to kill himself either. Except with the bottle.

There was another reason why he couldn't kill himself, DeBeque said, and that was because he wanted to see the murderer punished and the police hadn't yet caught him. They'd sniffed around DeBeque himself at first, but he had an alibi and, anyway, all his and her friends told them how much the two of them were in love. So then, even though nobody had seen any suspicious types in the neighborhood the day it happened, the cops had worked around with the theory that it was either a junkie who'd forced his way into the DeBeque apartment or a sneak thief that she'd surprised. The place had been ransacked and there was some jewelry and mad money missing. Her skull had been crushed with a lamp, and the cops figured she had tried to put up a fight.

So DeBeque kept coming to the Drop Back Inn every night and getting drunk and waiting for the cops to find his wife's killer. After three months went by, they still hadn't found the guy. The way it looked to Kaprelian then—and so far that was the way it had turned out—they never would. The last night he'd seen DeBeque, Fred had admitted that same thing for the first time and then he had walked out into the rain and vanished. Until just now.

Kaprelian said, "Fred, it's good to see you. I been wondering what happened to you, you disappeared so sudden four months ago."

"I guess you never expected I'd show up again, did you, Harry?"

"You want the truth, I sure didn't. But you really look great. Where you been all this time?"

"Putting the pieces back together again," DeBeque said. "Finding new meaning in life."

Kaprelian nodded. "You know, I thought you were headed for Skid Row or an early grave, you don't mind my saying so."

"No, I don't mind. You're absolutely right, Harry."

"Well—can I get you a drink?"

"Ginger ale," DeBeque said. "I'm off alcohol now."

Kaprelian was even more surprised. There are some guys, some drinkers, you don't ever figure *can* quit, and that was how DeBeque had struck him at the tag end of those three bad months. He said, "Me being a bar owner, I shouldn't say this, but I'm glad to hear that too. If there's one thing I learned after twenty years in this business, you can't drown your troubles or your sorrows in the juice. I seen hundreds try and not one succeed."

"You tried to tell me that a dozen times, as I recall," DeBeque said. "Fortunately, I realized you were right in time to do something about it."

Kaprelian scooped ice into a glass and filled it with ginger ale from the automatic hand dispenser. When he set the glass on the bar, one of the two workers down at the other end—the only other customers in the place—called to him for another beer. He drew it and took it down and then came back to lean on the bar in front of DeBeque.

"So where'd you go after you left four months ago?" he asked. "I mean, did you stay here in the city or what? I know you moved out of the neighborhood."

"No, I didn't stay here." DeBeque sipped his ginger ale. "It's funny

the way insights come to a man, Harry—and funny how long it takes sometimes. I spent three months not caring about anything, drinking myself to death, drowning in self-pity; then one morning I just woke up knowing I couldn't go on that way any longer. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I had to straighten myself out. I went upstate and dried out in a rented cabin in the mountains. The rest of the insight came there: I knew why I'd stopped drinking, what it was I had to do."

"What was that, Fred?"

"Find the man who murdered Karen."

Kaprelian had been listening with rapt attention. What DeBeque had turned into wasn't a bum or a corpse but the kind of comeback hero you see in television crime dramas and don't believe for a minute. When you heard it like this, though, in real life and straight from the gut, you knew it had to be the truth—and it made you feel good.

Still, it wasn't the most sensible decision DeBeque could have reached, not in real life, and Kaprelian said, "I don't know, Fred, if the cops couldn't find the guy—"

DeBeque nodded. "I went through all the objections myself," he said, "but I knew I still had to try. So I came back here to the city and I started looking. I spent a lot of time in the Tenderloin bars, and I got to know a few street people, got in with them, was more or less accepted by them. After a while I started asking questions and getting answers."

"You mean," Kaprelian said, astonished, "you actually got a line on the guy who did it—"

Smiling, DeBeque said, "No. All the answers I got were negative. No, Harry, I learned absolutely nothing—except that the police were wrong about the man who killed Karen. He wasn't a junkie or a sneak thief or a street criminal of any kind."

"Then who was he?"

"Someone who knew her, someone she trusted. Someone she would let in the apartment."

"Makes sense, I guess," Kaprelian said. "You have any idea who this someone could be?"

"Not at first. But after I did some discreet investigating, after I visited the neighborhood again a few times, it all came together like the answer to a mathematical equation. There was only one person it could be."

"Who?" Kaprelian asked.

"The mailman."

"The *mailman*?"

"Of course. Think about it, Harry. Who else would have easy access to our apartment? Who else could even be *seen* entering the apartment by neighbors without them thinking anything of it, or even remembering it later? The mailman."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I found out his name and I went to see him one night last week. I confronted him with knowledge of his guilt. He denied it, naturally; he kept right on denying it to the end."

"The end?"

"When I killed him," DeBeque said.

Kaprelian's neck went cold. "Killed him? Fred, you can't be serious! You didn't actually *kill* him. . . ."

"Don't sound so shocked," DeBeque said. "What else could I do? I had no evidence, I couldn't take him to the police. But neither could I allow him to get away with what he'd done to Karen. You understand that, don't you? I had no choice. I took out the gun I'd picked up in a pawnshop, and I shot him with it—right through the heart."

"Jeez," Kaprelian said. "Jeez."

DeBeque stopped smiling then and frowned down into his ginger ale; he was silent, kind of moody all of a sudden. Kaprelian became aware of how quiet it was and flipped on the TV. While he was doing that the two workers got up from their stools at the other end of the bar, waved at him and went on out.

DeBeque said suddenly, "Only then I realized he couldn't have been the one."

Kaprelian turned from the TV. "What?"

"It couldn't have been the mailman," DeBeque said. "He was left-handed, and the police established that the killer was probably right-handed. Something about the angle of the blow that killed Karen. So I started thinking who else it could have been, and then I knew: the grocery delivery boy. Except we used two groceries, two delivery boys, and it turned out both of them were right-handed. I talked to the first and I was sure he was the one. I shot him. Then I knew I'd been wrong, it was the other one. I shot him too."

"Hey," Kaprelian said. "Hey, Fred, what're you *saying*?"

"But it wasn't the delivery boys either." DeBeque's eyes were very bright. "Who, then? Somebody else from the neighborhood. . . and it came to me, I knew who it had to be."

Kaprelian still didn't quite grasp what he was hearing. It was all coming too fast. "Who?" he said.

"You," DeBeque said, and it wasn't until he pulled the gun that Kaprelian finally understood what was happening, what DeBeque had *really* turned into after those three grieving, alcoholic months. Only by then it was too late.

The last thing he heard was voices on the television—a crime drama, one of those where the guy's wife is murdered and he goes out and finds the real killer and ends up a hero in time for the last commercial. . .

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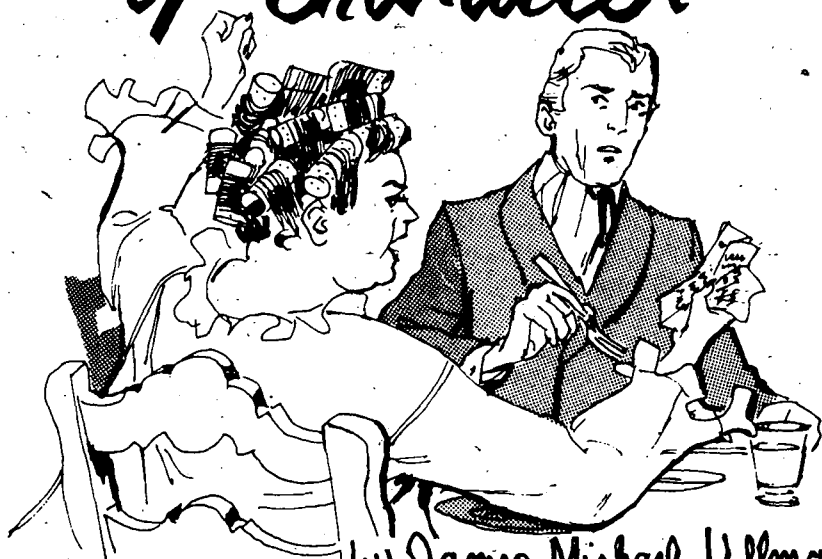
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"Know thyself!" said the philosopher . . . but how much more profitable it is to know thy neighbor. . .

A good Judge of Character



by James Michael Ullman

Alice opened the envelope with disinterest. It had no return address and was probably just another ad. But when she began reading the legal-sized page, her brows arched and her eyes widened.

"My God," she said. "I can't *believe* this."

Her husband George glanced up from his Saturday morning paper and scowled.

"What the hell is wrong now?"

"This—this *thing* in the mail. It's about Herb Meadows, our next-door neighbor. Or I should say, the man we *thought* was Herb Meadows. And it says—well, here. *You read.*"

She brought the page to him. She'd been slim and attractive once, but her gluttony had bloated her. She now appeared much older than her forty years.

George, a fiftyish man who'd managed to keep as trim as he'd been as a college track star, put his paper down. His brain this morning was fogged from the drinks he'd consumed long into the night at the country club. Taking the page from her, he tried to comprehend the meaning of what he saw.

Scrawled across the top of the page was the bold, hand-printed message: DO YOU WANT THIS ANIMAL TO LIVE IN YOUR MIDST?

Below that was a photocopy of a clipping from a Chicago newspaper dated three years earlier:

MOB FRONT MAN LINKED TO FOR-HIRE SLAYINGS

Police today arrested Herbert Larson, 49, operator of a number of mob-linked businesses, and charged him with being the go-between for professional killers and businessmen willing to pay for the murder of their business rivals.

Larson and a young woman found living with him in his Lake Shore Drive apartment were taken to Central Police Headquarters, where he was booked in connection with nine homicides during the past four years. Some victims were slain in gangland style, but other deaths were made to appear accidental.

The young woman, who identified herself as Jane Smith, was questioned and released without charge.

Authorities had no official comment about details of the case, but this newspaper learned from high police sources that an informant has named Larson as the intermediary in the slayings, which were carried out by mob assassins.

Larson has long been a target of police investigators specializing in Syndicate ventures, but this is the first time he has ever been charged with a crime.

Alongside the story was a photograph of a dapper, slim, white-haired man in a business suit, his hand at the elbow of a dark-haired girl in a

miniskirt, getting out of an elevator. Detectives flanked the couple.

The caption said: "Herb Larson and woman found with him at police headquarters."

The print was blurred. But the man could have been Herb Meadows, all right, and the woman certainly could have been his wife, Elaine.

A photocopy of another news clipping, dated a few weeks later, was under the first one:

LARSON MURDER CHARGES DROPPED

Murder charges against Herbert Larson, alleged go-between in a series of for-hire slayings of businessmen, were unexpectedly dropped today.

The state's attorney made no comment, but it was learned that a key witness in the case had disappeared. . .

Stunned, George tossed the page aside. There was a sinking feeling in his stomach. Good old Herb, an underworld front? Hell, if that was true. . .

"I always *did* think there was something funny about Herb," Alice said almost joyously. "That wife of his—young enough to be his daughter. And the mysterious business he runs out of his house. . ."

"I can't believe it," George said. "Oh, even though I like Herb I always sensed he had the makings of a scoundrel. I'm sure he'd pull some sharp business deals if you let him. But arranging murders? No, I still can't. . ."

"You and all that bragging you do about how you're such a good judge of character." Screwing up her face, Alice lit a cigarette. "I never liked Herb from the day he moved in. It was *you* who introduced him to everyone. Why, you even sponsored him for his membership in the country club, and. . ."

The phone rang.

Alice waddled off to answer it.

"Sam? You got one too? And so did the Andersons? And the Bonellis? Yes, I agree. It's terrible. I know. Yes, he's here. Just a minute. . ."

She turned, holding out the receiver.

"It's Sam Slater."

Slater, a former Mayor of the village and a senior officer of the bank, was chairman of the country club's membership committee.

"Morning, George." Slater spoke in his usual, deep, nothing-ever-fazes-me drawl, but George detected a steely undertone. "Seems like most everyone here who is anyone got those news clippings this morning. I guess we'd better do something about it."

"I think it'd be premature to do anything," George replied cautiously, "until we learn more. It could be a hoax, or some sick person's idea of a joke. Herb's pretty outspoken about his politics. And there are some people here who. . ."

"I know," Slater cut in smoothly. "That's why a few of us are meeting at my place this evening. The wives too. Cocktails, and afterwards we'll run over to the club for dinner. See you about six."

Abruptly, Slater hung up. It was his way of letting George know that if he and Alice didn't attend, George's future in the village's social life was at an end.

And of course that future was very important. Because as manager of the local branch of a brokerage house, George's job depended in large part on what the leaders of this wealthy suburb thought of him.

About a dozen couples, representing virtually the whole power structure of the village's society, had already gathered at Slater's big split-level home when George and Alice arrived.

George got a stiff drink and slipped into a corner. He wanted as little to do with this as possible. How did he ever get himself into this mess? It just couldn't be true about Herb.

He'd hit it off so well with Herb and Elaine right from the start. Herb had a casual, to-hell-with-it manner that appealed to George, who had once aspired to be an actor but who, at his wife's insistence, had spent his life in one tightly structured corporate role or another.

And there was Elaine. It was pleasant being around Elaine. Unlike the other wives, she was young, voluptuous and able to talk about practically anything, including stocks and bonds. Herb and Elaine had opened a modest account at George's brokerage office, and Elaine seemed to make as many investment decisions as Herb did. No, they simply had to be the right kind of people. . .

Slater, a crew-cut man with a drill sergeant's physique, brought the group to order.

"It's obvious," Slater said, "that we've got to form a committee to protect ourselves. People of this type—we can't tolerate them here."

"I should say not," the Mayor chimed in. "If the story got out, the village's reputation would be ruined. Think of what it would do to property values."

"Not to mention," a woman said, "what it would mean to our children. Those degenerates, living among us. Why, they might. . ."

"Now, just a minute," George said. Emboldened by the drink, he'd spoken impulsively and immediately regretted it. But he drew a breath and went on.

"If Herb's what those clippings say," he told them, "there'll be nobody more anxious to do something than I will. But we may be jumping to the wrong conclusion. The clippings could be fakes."

"Possibly," Slater replied, "but I don't think so. Why fake something like that when it would be so easy for Herb to disprove it? Anyhow, let's face it. There is something peculiar about him. He never talks about his background except in the vaguest way. Nobody really knows how he makes his living."

"And he's different," someone else said. "Remember the time he said that what the village needs is a good pornographic book store? The very ideal!"

"And his wife," a woman put in. "That is, the woman he says is his wife. The tiny bikinis she wears at the pool. It's as though. . ."

"All right, folks," Slater interrupted. "I guess we're all agreed. Someone will have to ask Herb about this to his face. And tell him he'd better tell the truth. Because if he denies the story, we'll have the police here check it out with the Chicago police."

"And if he admits the story is true," a man said grimly, "he's got to move out immediately."

"Nobody can move on such short notice," the Mayor pointed out. "A home that expensive—even in good times it takes weeks or months to find a buyer. And it's much harder now."

"I'll arrange that," Slater replied. "We'll buy the house. All of us here on the committee. The bank will finance the deal, so the out-of-pocket cost to each of us will be minimal. We'll put the title into escrow until a real estate agent can sell it for us. That way, we could force them out in a week or so."

"I suppose it could be handled that way," the Mayor conceded. "But

who'll talk to him?"

"Why, George, of course," Slater said. "How about it, George? You're as close to him as anyone. You introduced him to the rest of us, remember? And proposed him for membership? Not that anyone'd blame you if the story's true. If he's really linked to the underworld, you were taken in too."

The implication that George was to blame was in Slater's voice, in spite of what he said.

"Go over there tomorrow," Slater continued. "Lay it on the line. Let Herb know that if the story's true, it'll be in his best interest to sell us that house and move immediately. And tell him that if he doesn't. . ."

Late the next morning, George crossed the street to Herb's house.

He was in a foul mood. He and Alice had argued through most of the night. At first it was because George complained that Slater had no right to force him to confront Herb. Alice said he had it coming to him for being so gullible. Before it was over the argument expanded to include the whole of their relationship, winding up with loud, angry assertions about all the injustices each had suffered from the other.

Now, in the cold light of morning, George was apprehensive, his stomach churning with anxiety.

As he neared the house, the door opened. Herb's wife Elaine walked out. Despite the gravity of his mission, George experienced a stirring of lust coupled with envy that a man of Herb's age—which, come to think of it, was about his own age—should have a wife as young and desirable as Elaine.

She was in her late twenties, with dark hair and a bountifully curved figure. She carried a purse and wore a dress with an intriguingly high hemline.

As he neared, she smiled.

"Hi. You're up early, for Sunday."

"Yeah. Well," he said lamely, "I just wanted a little talk with Herb."

"He's on the sun porch. I'm driving into the city. My brother just flew in on business. I haven't seen him in years. But why don't you and Alice drop over for pot luck with us tonight? We haven't seen you for weeks. . ."

"Thanks. But we've got something else on."

He watched as Elaine crossed the driveway to her car, her hips

swaying provocatively.

Enough of that. . .

Clenching his fists, he went inside to have it out with good old Herb.

He found Herb watching television, a frosty glass beside him.

Herb looked up, grinned and said: "Join me in a drink? From the look on your face, you could use one."

"No, thanks."

Uncomfortably, George eased into a chair.

"Something's troubling me, all right. I hope you can put me straight. Both as to the facts, and as to who might have sent this to me. Here. . ."

He pulled the page with the copies of the clippings from his pocket and tossed it to Herb.

Frowning, Herb turned off the television set and started to read.

When he finished, he sat motionless for a moment.

"I'll be damned," he said. His voice was weary, the lilt gone out of it. "So they found me here too."

"They?"

"Some cops in Chicago. They're harassing me. The same thing happened when we lived in Florida. And before that, in California. They couldn't get at me through the courts, so they're doing this. We no sooner get settled in a community we like when. . ."

"You mean the story's true? That your real name's Larson? And you were a front for gangsters?"

"Oh, I know from the clippings it sounds horrible. . ."

George was outraged. "Dammit, it is horrible. And at least you might have thought about what you were doing to me. Letting me sponsor you for the country club. And then the way I defended you yesterday, saying it must be some kind of mistake—but never mind. Herb, you and Elaine have got to sell this house and move immediately."

"You speaking for yourself?"

"No. Slater formed a committee. They sent me to see you. And if the clippings are true, to deliver an ultimatum. If you don't move, we'll make your life here intolerable."

"I'm not so sure I want to move," Herb said slowly. "Not this time."

I let them run me out of California. And Florida. But this time, I'm inclined to tough it out."

"Don't be a fool. You don't know what you'd be letting yourself in for."

"Such as?" Herb settled back, meeting George's gaze squarely. "You'd throw me out of your country club. Which, frankly; I never liked anyhow. You'd turn your backs when you saw me on the street. Maybe there'd be a few anonymous phone calls at night. But after a while. . ."

"There wouldn't be any after a while," George broke in. "You're underestimating us. Slater spelled it all out. Property values are at stake, so we'll go to virtually any lengths to get rid of you. There'll be constant phone calls, vandalism and so on. Plus official pressure. The police will ignore you when you ask them to protect your property. They'll follow you, ticketing you or your wife if you drive as much as one mile an hour over the speed limit. There'll be visits from city hall inspectors who'll find obscure building and fire code violations. Your taxes will soar. The sanitation department will stop picking up your garbage. And if those tactics don't work—well, some night we'll just burn you out. Set fire to this place, stand back and watch. And of course the firemen won't get here until there's nothing left to save. Not that I'd approve of it going that far. But. . ."

Herb thought that over.

"All right," he said. "I can't subject Elaine to that. But selling this place won't be easy. I've got a big equity here. The way properties have been moving lately. . ."

"The committee will buy your house. At a generous price."

"How nice. And will you find us a new home? Where nobody will ever know who we are?"

"That," George couldn't help replying, "is something you should have thought of before you became a middleman for people who wanted to kill other people." He started to rise. "Sorry, but. . ."

"Just a minute." A new, commanding quality had crept into Herb's voice. "When you go back to your self-righteous committee, I want you to tell my side of this. When it began, my first wife was still alive. She was an invalid and needed constant medical care. That broke me. When the banks wouldn't lend more, I went to the only people who would—the mob. And when I couldn't repay, they made me a proposi-

tion. They'd forgive the debt if I'd manage some of their businesses. I agreed. I needed the money to make my wife as comfortable as possible. And when she finally died, I was in too deep and couldn't back out."

"I can understand that," George said. "But arranging all those murders. . ."

"I had no choice. I learned too late that that was part of the deal. If I didn't go along, the mob would have killed me. But for what it's worth, there wasn't a person whose contract I handled who didn't have it coming, one way or another."

"Are you trying to justify your role in murdering people?"

"Just telling you that when a businessman gets desperate enough to pay for a competitor's murder there's usually a good reason. Those news clippings were inaccurate, by the way. The police tried to pin every unsolved homicide they could on me. But in every case but one in which I was actually involved, the victims were animals whose business tactics were so ruthless and unethical that murdering the guy was the only way for the client to survive. The one exception. . ."

Herb paused, then went on.

"This is something I wish you wouldn't tell your committee. But confidentially, it was a guy's wife. She'd made his life intolerable. So after he begged me for a contract, I gave his name to the broker too."

"Broker?"

"That's what I called the man. I never saw him. All I had was a phone number. I'd dial it, give him the client's name and then hang up. The broker would take it from there. He'd contact the client, negotiate the fee, collect it and arrange for a hit man to do the job. Usually, the fee was around fifteen or twenty thousand, plus five thousand or so more if you wanted it made to look like an accident. Of course with inflation and all, it would probably cost more today."

There was a table behind Herb. On it was a poolside photograph of Elaine wearing a tiny bikini that displayed nearly all of her stunning figure.

And behind the photo, through a window looking out across the street, George saw Alice lumbering into view, her elephantine form garbed in a ridiculously skimpy sun-suit.

"I don't suppose," George said slowly, "you'd still have that phone number. . ."

That evening Elaine put her purse on the kitchen table, settled in a chair and said:

"So Sam Slater formed a committee. No wonder George looked so funny this morning." She shook her head. "It's just like Florida. And California."

"Sure is."

Herb poured her a drink. They touched glasses.

"Those phony clippings," he went on, "work beautifully. First, our frightened neighbors buy our house for a lot more than we paid for it. And then the real money starts rolling in, from suckers who ask me to arrange murders for them. Not realizing that I've never seen, much less known, a gangster in my life."

"How many so far?"

"Five, including George and Slater. George wants his wife done in. Slater wants to get rid of his boss, so he can be top dog at the bank. Before we're through here, I think we could gross as much as a quarter million. Your brother all set to play his role as the broker? Negotiating the fees, and then collecting for murders that'll never be committed?"

"Yes." Pensively, Elaine sipped from her drink. "It's a perfect set-up. When the victims finally realize they've been taken, they can't complain. To prosecute, they'd have to admit to conspiring to murder. Of course by then we'll have new identities and be thousands of miles away anyhow. And frankly, I'm not surprised about Slater and the others trying to pay you to kill someone. But good old reliable George. . ."

"All I had to do," Herb replied, "was say I'd once arranged for the murder of a man's wife. He took the bait immediately. I knew he would. As I keep telling you, I'm a good judge of character."



With a little advance information, one can make haste more slowly . . .

An Untimely DEATH

by E. R. Carlson



I climbed the carpeted stairway to the second floor and at the end of the hall located a door lettered *John Cain, Attorney-at-Law*. I opened the door and entered. A young girl was seated at a desk filing her nails. She looked up and asked in a squeaky voice: "Can I help you?"

The voice threw me for a moment—it didn't go with her otherwise attractive features—but I recovered quickly. "Yes you can, sweetheart. My name is Harry Gibbs. I'm here to see John Cain."

"Mr. Cain is out to lunch, but I expect him back any minute now. He asked for you to please wait."

I sat down in a chair and lit a cigarette. Sweetheart continued to file her nails, a study in boredom.

The outer door opened and John Cain walked in. He hadn't changed much in ten years, a small, wiry man now in his early forties with the same evasive brown eyes framed behind rimless glasses. I stood up and we shook hands.

"Good to see you, Harry," he said, putting an arm around my shoulder and guiding me into his inner office. "Have a chair. I'll be with you in a minute." He stepped to the doorway. "You can go to lunch now, Gloria."

Cain closed the door to his inner office and turned to me. "I'm glad you could make it to Muskegon, Harry."

"My pleasure, John. Nice place you have here. How's business?"

"Can't complain, Harry. Double the money and half the work of being a county prosecutor. But what caused you to leave the state police after thirteen years and become a private investigator in Detroit?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe I blamed the department when my marriage to Sue went up in smoke. The hours I worked on the intelligence squad weren't exactly regular. At one stretch I was undercover three months." It still hurt to think about Sue, remarried and apparently happy with some eight-to-five highway engineer.

Cain started to make the customary sympathetic sounds over the breakup of my marriage, but I cut him short. "Skip it, John. Let's get down to business."

"Of course, Harry," Cain said, going behind his desk and seating himself in a large swivel chair. "A little more than seven years ago a man named Edward Stanton drowned in Lake Michigan a few miles north of here. At least it was presumed he drowned. There were no witnesses. His body was never recovered. It was Stanton's bit to take an early-morning swim. His beach robe, watch and glasses were neatly piled on the beach and his footprints led into the water. It was a prominent death. He had quite a reputation as a writer. Do you recall reading about it in the newspapers?"

"Can't say that I do."

"It doesn't matter." Cain fingered a paperweight on his desk. "Anyway, being county prosecutor at the time, I got to meet Mrs. Stanton.

She's a lovely woman, and over the intervening years we have become close friends."

I thought I detected a proprietary tone in Cain's voice when he said "close friends" but I avoided smirking. As far as I knew, Cain was still a bachelor.

"As a matter of fact," Cain said, "I was about to file the necessary papers in court to have Edward Stanton declared legally dead when this perplexing situation arose." Cain picked up a portfolio from his desk and withdrew the contents: a magazine and several typewritten sheets of paper.

Cain did not offer the documents to me for inspection. Instead, he placed his hands over them gingerly. "Earlier this week Ann—Mrs. Stanton—brought these to me. A story in this magazine struck her as being very similar to one her husband had once written and discarded. She searched through his papers and located a rough draft of the story. After comparing the two, she became highly agitated. I could understand it after reading them myself. Not only were the stories very similar in plot, there were certain phrases that were practically identical. I was at a loss for an explanation."

Cain nervously ran his hand through his thinning hair and his evasive brown eyes met mine for an instant before he got up and made a pretense of adjusting the drapes. The Stantons were beginning to interest me. I've always been a sucker for a missing-person case.

Cain sat down on the couch by the window. "With Ann urging me to do something, I put through a call to the magazine in New York. Using admiration of the story as an excuse, I tried to get the address of the author, Arnold Rose. No soap. But I did finally drag out of them the fact that the story had been submitted through an agent, a Miss Elizabeth Applewhite of Portland, Oregon."

Cain got up from the couch and moved back to his desk. "Then I placed a call to Miss Applewhite in Portland. She seemed pleased to get my call. However, she had instructions from her client not to give information about him to anyone, including the editors of the magazines who purchased his stories. Period. End of conversation."

Cain sighed heavily. "I want you to fly out to Portland, Harry, and locate the mysterious Mr. Rose. I don't know how you're going to do it, but I do know that Ann won't rest until she finds out if Rose is who she suspects he is, her husband Edward Stanton." Cain reached for the

telephone. "I'll call Ann and let her know we're coming."

Riding beside Cain, we sped through Muskegon and a few minutes later we had our first sight of Lake Michigan stretching blue and sparkling in the August sunshine.

"Did you ever see a prettier sight?" asked Cain.

"It sure beats Detroit," I replied, recalling the grim view from my apartment windows.

"Wait till you see the Stanton place. Ann's grandfather gave her the house as a wedding present. The family fortune dates back to nineteenth-century lumbering."

We followed the road parallel to the lake for several more miles before turning into a driveway bordered by pines. At the end of the driveway stood a brick-and-redwood split-level house built into a bluff overlooking the lake. I calculated the cost of the house at a hundred grand, give or take a few thousand.

As we got out of the car, a slender dark-haired woman in her early thirties opened the door to greet us. "Hello, John. I've been watching for you."

Cain introduced me to Mrs. Stanton. We followed her along a hallway to a huge livingroom with a sweep of glass across the front giving a magnificent view of the lake. Mrs. Stanton seated me in a comfortable chair and she and Cain sat on a nearby sofa.

"When do you leave for Portland, Mr. Gibbs?" she asked.

"Today's Friday. I'll fly out Monday morning."

"I wish I could go with you," she said. "I feel so helpless just sitting here and waiting for your report."

Cain shook his head vigorously in the negative. "Now, Ann," he said, "we agreed that locating Rose was a job for a professional. We can't have you flying out to Portland in your state of mind. And you mustn't get your hopes too high."

"I think it best I go alone, Mrs. Stanton."

She nodded her head in resignation. "That was foolish of me."

"I can understand your anxiety, Mrs. Stanton," I said. "It would be helpful if you could answer a few questions for me."

"Of course, I'll try."

"First I'd like a physical description of your husband—his age, height, weight, color of hair and eyes, identifying marks, that sort of thing."

"Edward was twelve years older than I. That would make him forty-five. He was my English professor in college. We got married the day I graduated, and came here to live. He was about your height, Mr. Gibbs, just over six feet, and he kept his weight at one hundred seventy. His hair and eyes were brown, and he usually wore glasses."

"Do you have a picture of your husband I could borrow?"

Mrs. Stanton got up from the sofa and brought me a framed picture from a table near the window. The face in the picture was intelligent, introspective, the eyes focused on some far horizon. I removed the picture and returned the frame to the table. From the window I could see the stretch of beach from which Stanton had vanished. Mrs. Stanton came over and stood silently beside me. Enveloped in the scent of her perfume, I wondered what she was thinking as she looked down at the beach. I had formed no opinion as to whether Stanton was alive or dead, but as I stood there beside the lovely Mrs. Stanton in her beautiful home it seemed to me it would take an unusual man to walk away from a setup like this.

I broke the silence. "Can you think of any reason why your husband would voluntarily disappear, Mrs. Stanton?"

She turned to me with tears in her eyes. "No, I can't, Mr. Gibbs. I've asked myself that question many times. Edward and I had a happy marriage. His work was everything to him. He wrote his two best novels right here in this house. Are you familiar with his work?"

"No," I replied, surprised to find myself wishing I could have said yes.

Mrs. Stanton picked up a book from the table and pressed it into my hand. "This was Edward's last novel. I think you might enjoy it."

I turned the book over in my hand. Stanton's picture was on the back of the dust jacket, the same likeness I had secured earlier. "Thanks, Mrs. Stanton. Maybe I can read it on the flight to Portland."

Cain used this as his cue to break in. "Well, Harry, I know you're anxious to get started back to Detroit. It's a long drive."

"You're right, John. We had better be going."

Mrs. Stanton walked us to the door and we said our goodbyes. Cain lingered behind to say a few words to her in private. From the car I watched him give her a kiss on the cheek before he joined me.

On the drive back to Muskegon, Cain passed me an envelope containing ten one-hundred-dollar bills. "That's your retainer, Harry. If

you need more, let me know. Have you ever been to Portland?"

I said I hadn't.

"A beautiful city," Cain said. "I attended a convention there last year. Since you're unfamiliar with the city, I'd recommend the Benson Hotel. Centrally located. Excellent dining room. And it will be helpful knowing where you are staying in case I need to reach you."

"The Benson it is, John."

The stewardess roused me from a sound sleep and asked me to fasten my seatbelt as we were preparing to land. I looked out the window and saw a towering snowcapped mountain that seemed almost close enough to touch. Still half asleep, I fumbled with my seatbelt as the plane circled the mountain, gradually losing altitude. I picked up the Stanton novel that had fallen to the floor during my nap and put it in my briefcase. The city of Portland took shape below, growing larger by the minute. The plane made its final approach along a river, low enough for me to have the absurd fear that the pilot had mistaken the river for the airport runway. I closed my eyes and waited for the splash. The plane made a slight turn and touched down on the solid concrete runway of Portland International Airport.

I walked into the terminal and headed for the rest room to freshen up. Then I grabbed my suitcase off the self-service baggage rack and stepped outside into bright noonday sunshine. A half-hour busride later I checked into the Benson Hotel and got settled in my room. I looked through the telephone directory and, as I expected, did not find a listing for either Arnold Rose or Edward Stanton. I did find a listing for Elizabeth Applewhite, Attorney. In the Georgia-Pacific Building. This puzzled me a little. Cain had not mentioned that Elizabeth Applewhite was an attorney. I picked up the telephone and dialed her number.

After one ring, a woman's voice answered briskly, "Miss Applewhite speaking."

"Miss Applewhite, my name is Harry Gibbs. I'm a private investigator from Detroit. I'd like to see you, today if possible, on a matter that can't be discussed over the telephone."

Miss Applewhite took her time before replying. "I can't imagine what it is you wish to discuss with me, Mr. Gibbs, but if you can be at my office promptly at three, I will see you."

"Thank you, Miss Applewhite. I'll be there. Goodbye."

Promptly at three, I entered Miss Applewhite's office in the Georgia-Pacific Building. Sitting behind a large wooden desk was a frumpy, gray-haired woman in her fifties who eyed me suspiciously behind steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Miss Applewhite?" I asked.

"Yes, and you must be Mr. Gibbs, the private investigator from Detroit."

"That's right."

She motioned me to a chair. "How long have you been in Portland, Mr. Gibbs?"

"I flew in today."

"I see. The reason I asked, my office was broken into last week. It's the first time such a thing has ever happened to me."

"And you suspected *me*?" I asked.

"Well, you are a private investigator. I guess it was the timing of your call, coming out of the blue, after the break-in. As an attorney specializing in investment trusts, I have never had any contact with the criminal element."

"I'm not here on a criminal matter, Miss Applewhite," I said, "but on a missing-person case."

"A missing-person case?"

"Yes. Seven years ago a man named Edward Stanton disappeared from Michigan. We have reason to believe he is now living in Portland under a different name." I took Stanton's novel out of my briefcase and handed it to her with the picture on the dust jacket face up.

"Is that a picture of the man you know as Arnold Rose?" I asked.

My question was answered without words. I have never seen a more bewildered look on a face. She gazed at the picture in stunned silence. Then she opened the cover and read the blurb on the dust jacket. I waited patiently for her to regain her composure.

Finally she spoke, her voice edged in bitterness. "Yes, that's Arnold. I guess the joke's on me, Mr. Gibbs. Here I was thinking I had a small part in the discovery of a talented, unknown writer, and the dust jacket says five published novels. No wonder his stuff sold."

I nodded my head sympathetically.

She handed the book back to me. "Are you the one who called last week trying to get Arnold's address?"

"No, that was Mrs. Stanton's attorney, John Cain."

"Mrs. Stanton? Is Arnold married?"

"Yes. Mrs. Stanton recognized Rose's magazine story as the work of her husband who disappeared seven years ago, presumably drowned."

"I see."

"I want you to put me in touch with Stanton, Miss Applewhite."

"I don't know if he'll want to see you, Mr. Gibbs, but I'll give it a try."

"When?" I asked.

"Today. Where are you staying?"

"At the Benson."

"Go back to the Benson and wait for my call."

I returned to the hotel and waited.

At five o'clock the telephone rang. "Gibbs speaking."

"Miss Applewhite here. Arnold will see you. I arranged it for seven this evening. He has a room at the St. Vincent Hospital annex on West-over Road. It's only a few minutes by taxi from your hotel."

"Was he surprised that you had discovered his true identity?"

"He didn't seem too surprised. More embarrassed than anything else. A strange fellow, Arnold."

I thanked Miss Applewhite for her help and hung up. I took a shower and changed my shirt and it was still only five-thirty. Not being hungry enough for dinner, I decided to walk to the hospital. I took Burnside, as directed by the hotel desk clerk, and walked steadily uphill for a couple of miles. Finally I caught a glimpse of the hospital, a rambling old building nestled into a hillside several blocks away.

The walk had given me an appetite. I spotted a restaurant, went in and ordered French toast and apple pie. I lingered over coffee until it was nearly time to keep my appointment with Stanton. The last couple of blocks was a steep climb and left me short of breath. I followed the hospital driveway around to the annex.

Inside the annex, I walked up a flight of stairs to an empty hallway that led to a counter behind which two old women were working. One of them got up to wait on me.

"I'd like to see Arnold Rose," I said.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Rose told me he was expecting a caller. Take the elevator. It's the third floor, room 312. I'll buzz Mr. Rose to let him know you're here."

I entered the ancient elevator and pressed 3. The elevator moved at

a snail's pace, finally creaking to a stop. I stepped out into a darkened hallway. Near the far end, a man stood framed in the light from an open door. I walked toward him, past closed doors, each with a tiny glazed glass window. The place had a feeling of emptiness.

As I neared the man, he spoke first. "Good evening, Mr. Gibbs."

"Good evening, Stanton."

He invited me into his room. I entered a cubicle not much larger than a prison cell. The room was furnished with a cot and a wooden table and chair. On the table was a typewriter and an ashtray filled with cigarette butts. At the end of the room was a window, curtainless, with the shade half drawn. Next to the window was a sink and mirror.

Stanton offered me the chair, apologizing for the cramped quarters. He sat down on the cot.

"What kind of place is this?" I asked.

"It used to be a student nurses' dormitory. The Sisters still occupy the top floor. A new hospital is under construction across town and this one is scheduled to be closed. I share this floor with two interns. It has certain advantages, namely that it's cheap, it's quiet, and it's convenient to work."

"Do you work at the hospital?" I asked.

"Yes. I've been a gardener here for two years."

"This room is quite a contrast to your house on Lake Michigan," I said.

"You've met my wife?"

"Yes, I saw her Friday. I left her in a very anxious state of mind."

Stanton dropped his head and stared at the floor. "I'm sorry for Ann. This must be a very hard thing for her to understand. Miss Applewhite told me that Ann recognized one of my stories. I knew it was risky using old material. Maybe I unconsciously wished for something like this to happen."

"How did you arrange the disappearance?" I asked.

"It was easy. A closemouthed friend from Chicago brought his boat up to Muskegon, docked overnight, and picked me out of the water at dawn the next morning."

"Why did you disappear?" I asked.

"After my last novel, the fifth, I was finished, written out. I had nothing left to say. But in the course of writing those five novels, I had snowballed myself onto the best-seller lists. My agent and my pub-

lisher were hounding me to sign a contract for a sixth. One reviewer said I was on the edge of greatness. The edge of despair would have described it better. I just wanted to crawl in a hole and die. I got to thinking, what if I should die at thirty-eight? Then no one would ever know I was a burnt-out case. Can you imagine the reputation Dreiser would enjoy today if he had died at thirty with *Sister Carrie* his only book?

"Well, I didn't have the courage to kill myself. But I had to escape the pressures somehow, so I faked the drowning. I knew the absence of a body would leave some doubts, but it came off beautifully. For the past seven years I have watched my reputation grow. That was enough until recently I got the urge to write again. I prevailed on Miss Applewhite, who does legal work for the hospital, to act as my agent. It was a big mistake going back to the typewriter."

I had listened long enough. "You and your silly reputation. What about your wife?"

"You think Ann wants me back after this?"

"She didn't send me out here to kick you in the shins."

"I don't know," Stanton said. "I just don't know what to do."

I got up to leave. "I'm flying back to Michigan tomorrow. If you decide to come along, let me know. I'm staying at the Benson Hotel."

"I'll think about it," Stanton said.

"You do that. Will you call your wife?"

"Yes, I owe her that."

I passed up the elevator in favor of the stairway. It was beginning to rain when I got outside. I found a taxi at the hospital entrance and rode back to the hotel. When I got to my room, I placed a call to Cain at his residence. It was eleven o'clock in Muskegon. There was no answer. I had the operator try his office number just in case he was working late. No answer there either. I told the operator I would try later.

I removed my shoes and lay down on the bed. I must have dozed off because it was dark outside when the ringing of the telephone awakened me.

"Gibbs speaking."

"Hello, Harry. John Cain here. Any news on Rose?"

"Yes, John. I tried to call you earlier. Rose and Stanton are one and the same."

"I was afraid of that," Cain said. "How did you locate him?"

"Through Miss Applewhite. She put me in touch."

"You met Stanton face to face?"

"Sure."

"Where?" asked Cain.

"At a room he's got in a dormitory at St. Vincent Hospital."

"He lives at the hospital?"

"Right. Works there as a gardener. Lives like a monk in a nearly deserted dormitory. He and two interns have the whole third floor to themselves."

"What's his room number?" Cain asked.

"It's 312. Why?"

"Ann will probably want to call him."

"He doesn't have a telephone in his room, just a buzzer connected to the main desk. He said he'd call her."

"He did, huh? What are his plans now?"

"I don't know. He's a pretty mixed-up character. Sits there and broods about his reputation as a writer, doesn't seem to have much contact with reality."

"You've done a good job, Harry. When are you going back to Michigan?"

"Tomorrow."

"Fine. I'll hang up now and give Ann a call. Good night."

It was too early to go to bed. I put on my shoes and went down to the hotel lounge.

The first manhattan didn't do a thing for me. Halfway through the second one, I began to relax. The bartender, an older man, approached and emptied my ashtray. "Haven't seen you in here before, have I?"

"No."

"Where you from?"

"Detroit."

"Had a customer in here from Michigan last week. Nervous little guy. Never looked you in the eye. But he drank manhattans like he had a wooden leg."

The bartender moved away and I got to thinking about Cain and Mrs. Stanton. Whatever Cain had going with her, it would be over if Stanton returned to his wife. I had never cared much for Cain as a prosecutor. Several times we had gotten into heated arguments over

my testimony as a witness. He wasn't above asking a witness to embellish the truth. He hated to lose.

I motioned to the bartender for a refill. It wasn't Cain's nature to stand aside if he wanted Mrs. Stanton for himself. He would take action—but what could he do, short of murder, to stop Stanton from returning to his wife? I began to feel uneasy.

The bartender returned with my third manhattan. Three was my limit.

"That fellow with the wooden leg from Michigan, did he wear glasses?"

"Can't remember."

I sipped my drink. Locating Stanton had been an easy job. Why hadn't Cain done it himself? Maybe he'd tried. That would explain the break-in at Miss Applewhite's office last week. Could Cain have used me to locate Stanton while he stayed out of sight here in Portland? I began to sweat.

I returned to my room and placed a call to Cain at his residence. It was now one-thirty A.M. in Muskegon. There was no answer. Did Cain prize Mrs. Stanton enough to kill for her? It was a wild idea, but I decided to put Stanton on his guard before checking my suspicions further.

I took a taxi to the hospital and had the driver drop me at the annex entrance. The same woman I had talked to earlier was still on duty at the first-floor counter. I asked her if Rose was in his room.

"Yes, I'm sure he is. I'll buzz him."

Just then I heard it, the discharge of a gun, distant but distinct. "Call the police!" I yelled as I ran for the stairs. As I neared the third-floor landing, a door pushed open and Cain stepped out with a .38 in his hand. I felt like a fool—I was too late to help Stanton and Cain had the drop on me!

He spoke. "You always were a good detective, Harry."

I jumped at him. His gun came up and the muzzle flashed fire in my face. I fell backward down the stairs and blacked out as Cain rushed by.

I opened my eyes and looked into the face of an angel. She wore a nursing cap and spoke softly. "Please lie still. You have a head wound."

She didn't need to tell me that. My head felt like it had been creased with a red-hot poker.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"In the emergency room at St. Vincent Hospital. My name is Sister Josefa. There was a terrible accident. A gunman shot and killed our Mr. Rose and wounded you."

"Did he get away?" I asked.

"Oh, no—he ran right into the police at the entrance to the annex. A Captain Murphy is waiting to question you."

"Send him in," I said.

A tall, heavyset man dressed in civilian clothes came in and stood beside my bed. "I'm Captain Murphy, Portland police. I have a few questions to ask you if you feel up to it, Mr. Gibbs."

"Shoot away," I said with a weak smile.

Murphy's face remained expressionless. "Miss Applewhite, a friend of the dead man, was able to give us some background on this unfortunate affair. We have Cain in custody. We caught him with a gun in his hand, but he isn't talking. We'll have to wait on the autopsy to see what charges to file against him."

"How about murder one for a start?"

"It isn't that simple," Captain Murphy said. "Sometime last night Rose, or Stanton if you prefer, took an overdose of sleeping pills and left a suicide note. He was either unconscious or already dead when Cain shot him."

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BLACKMAIL FOR TWO



When he stops by my lobby stand that evening, Mr. Loftus has his customary pleasant smile. "How's the newspaper business tonight, Leon?"

I hand him his *Dispatch*. "Not too bad," I say. "Here's your copy, sir."

It is our usual go-round. Mr. Loftus' smile holds as he tucks the paper under his arm, plucks a package of mints from the display rack.

BLACKMAIL FOR TWO

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After paying, he turns toward the elevator bank, then abruptly swings back. "You close down when, Leon—about eight?"

"Yessir."

"I was wondering. . . would you care to stop up for a few minutes before you leave? I'd like to have a little talk with you."

This is an unexpected tack. I say hesitatingly, "I'd be glad to, Mr. Loftus, only. . ."

"Yes?"

"I told Lucille—my wife, that is—I'd try to get home early. There's a John Wayne movie at the Bijou we'd like to catch."

He flaps one palm. "No problem. I promise to be brief. You know my suite?"

"Yessir. 10-C."

"Fine. I'll expect you, then."

The next hour is fairly busy, but I still have odd moments to speculate about what's behind Mr. Loftus' request. I have not as yet learned very much about him as he's taken up residence in the Templeton Towers complex only a few weeks ago. In that time, though, he has become one of my best customers. In addition, he's always affable, never patronizing.

Mr. Loftus is in lounging robe and slippers when I present myself. Tall and lean, with sharply-etched features and prematurely gray hair, he's an imposing figure. He waves me to a seat on the divan, indicates a compact cellarette.

"What's your pleasure?"

"I don't drink, sir."

He nods appreciatively. "You're a sensible young man. Unfortunately, I do. You don't mind?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you." Mr. Loftus builds himself a gin and tonic, takes a deep pull, then joins me on the divan. "I said I wouldn't take up too much of your time, Leon," he tells me. "First off, you said you were married?"

"Yes."

"I don't wish to be blunt, but I have a reason for asking: how do you and your wife get along?"

I grin. "Lucille is a great girl, Mr. Loftus."

"I'm quite sure she is," he says. "No problems, then?"

"Nothing we can't handle."

"Not even financial?"

I shrug. "At some time or other, every couple's concerned about money."

"But that newsstand of yours downstairs takes care of your concern?"

"Well, . . . not always. . . ."

"Then you could use some extra income?" He is eying me rather intently now.

I grin again. "This's not exactly a lily-white town, Mr. Loftus. A character by the name of Big Tom Tanner has some special interests, and if a fellow is hard-pressed and knows where to go. . . ."

He obviously doesn't favor my intimation. "I'm not referring to gambling," he tells me shortly. "I'm talking about an extra take that's sure."

I admit, "I guess I could always use some, if you put it that way. . . ."

Mr. Loftus says, "Let me put it another way. How long have you been operating your stand?"

"Ever since the Towers opened," I say. "Three years."

"And in that length of time, you've undoubtedly come to know many of the tenants. That is to say, not only their names and respective suites, but also something about their personal lives. Their marital status. . . what they do for a living. . . perhaps who visits them regularly. . . ." All of this is more of a statement than a multiple question.

I say, "I suppose so. I mean, being right there in the lobby every day a fellow can't help learning things. . . ."

"Exactly," Mr. Loftus says. "And very likely including some details the parties concerned would prefer not to have—ah—publicized."

"Look, Mr. Loftus. . . ."

"Such as which single ladies appear to be entertaining overnight gentlemen friends or to be receiving frequent deliveries from expensive shops. Or gentlemen, married or otherwise, who would seem to be living beyond an income their employment could provide. . . ."

I am not relishing any of this. I give him a close look and then I get to my feet and I say bluntly, "Sir, I could be wrong—but it sounds like you're suggesting extortion. As if you'd like me to help you somehow."

He frames his pleasant smile. "And if I were?"

I swing toward the door. "No way," I tell him firmly.

He catches my arm. "Don't be too hasty, Leon," he says. "Nobody

gets hurt, actually."

"Dammit, Mr. Loftus. . ."

"I need your help, Leon," he presses quietly. "I'm not advocating your direct involvement. As you know, I'm new to this area, but I figure the Towers as a potential windfall, given some time to pursue the right leads. Unfortunately, I'm overextended financially at present and I don't have that time. You make up for my lack by suggesting those leads and I'll follow through—ah—professionally with the specifics—plus a nice cut for you."

He gets up too, claps one hand on my shoulder. "Just give it a little thought. We'll have another talk in a day or so."

My mind is spinning; I don't answer him as I again turn to the door. As I open it, Mr. Loftus adds evenly, "You understand, of course, all this is strictly between us. I'd flatly deny everything should you be tempted to bring my—ah—remarks to the attention of the police."

I still do not reply as I leave.

At home, Lucille is plenty upset when I tell her what has happened. "What are you going to do?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I say.

"Are you going to the police?"

"I can't," I point out. "Like Mr. Loftus said, I can't prove anything. I'd only make a fool of myself and then he could bring charges. . ."

"But you've got to do *something*. . ."

It is a problem, all right. Lucille and I kick it around all night. We even pass up John Wayne. At four A.M., we are still drinking coffee and talking. . .

The next evening, when he picks up his paper, Mr. Loftus makes no mention of our session. The following night, though, he does. "As I mentioned, Leon, I'm rather pressed for time. Would tonight be convenient for our second chat?"

I nod. "I—I suppose so, sir."

"Good. I'll expect you."

There is no preliminary sparring this time; Mr. Loftus gets right to business. "I trust you've reached a decision which will benefit both of us," he says.

I am still hesitant. "I guess I have," I say. "But I had to tell my wife. . ."

He is not irked. "I expected no less," he informs me. "From what

you mentioned originally, I understand she is quite intelligent. . . and will be discreet."

"Yes. . . well, this's what I've come up with. . ." I take a folded sheet from my pocket on which I have listed three names and suite numbers.

"You appreciate, Mr. Loftus, none of this is definite. It's only my own thinking, as you suggested."

"Of course."

"Okay, then. I'm pretty sure the rent for Miss Eckles' suite is being paid by a Mr. Darrow; he's a prominent banker, married with two kids, and he visits up there two or three evenings a week.

"Mr. Croydon works at City Hall. He's only a clerk in the engineer's office, but I've seen his layout when I've gone up to deliver packages that were left at the stand, and it's mighty plush. He could be tipping bidders on potential city contracts.

"Mr. Landers was a distributor for films and photographic equipment. I say 'was' because he hasn't worked regularly for six months. But he's still living high, entertaining frequently. Maybe he's pushing porno flicks on the side. . ."

Mr. Loftus takes the sheet, reviews the data, nods his approval. "Very good. As you say, nothing definite but a high potential." He smiles. "Extremely high, as a matter of fact."

"I tried to be helpful," I offer.

"And you have been," he says. "As I mentioned originally, checking these out specifically, making actual contact and proposing the—ah—payment schedules will be my responsibility." His manner implies our session is concluded.

"I understand," I say.

"You'll hear from me," he tells me as I leave.

Mr. Loftus is mistaken; we never have that contact. There is, though, a brief bit about him in the paper two nights later. The item relates how he is set upon and beaten up by two thugs in the Towers parking area. Both assailants get away, but not before another tenant coming to Mr. Loftus' aid glimpses them and furnishes the police with descriptions of a sort. Unfortunately, while the descriptions approximate those of a couple of Big Tom Tanner's strong-arm goons, they are too vague to warrant actual arrests.

The following day, the Towers' super tells me Mr. Loftus has skipped town.

Lucille and I are reviewing the whole affair tonight. "I would have thought your Mr. Loftus was too shrewd to take to gambling," she muses.

"But it looks like he did," I say. "I should have suspected as much when he got real frosty as I casually mentioned Tom Tanner. He was new to this area, needed funds, and got in over his head. When he didn't pay up, Tanner started putting on the heat. That was why Loftus was sweating for time. He assessed my position, tried to recruit me to speed up his own specialty. . . ."

Lucille builds a half-smile. "We didn't help him any, making up that phony list of potential victims."

"We didn't know about his gambling then," I point out. "We were just trying to stall him until we could come up with a better tack."

"Still, I'm a little sorry. You always said Mr. Loftus was a perfect gentleman, never patronizing to you or anything."

"That's true."

"And we were getting along all right."

"Live and let live, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Whatever we did was only to protect our own interests," I say. "The Towers is a gold-mine already; another six months, if I keep alert and observant, I figure to double our collections."

Lucille gives me a big kiss: "Gee, that sounds great!" she says. "Considering everything, I guess it would have been stupid to let a 'professional' edge us out."

Like I originally told Mr. Loftus: Lucille is a great girl. Practical too.



*Bad pennies, they say, always turn up—but when they don't
it's sometimes necessary to go looking for them.*

NEXT IN LINE



Four of my cigarettes were missing.

Ordinarily I would not have noticed the loss at all. However, I had been attempting to give up smoking, and, as a starter, had rationed myself to one pack a day.

This morning I had broken open a new pack and placed the twenty cigarettes inside my silver case. I had then gone downstairs and breakfasted.

I then retired to the library, lighted my first cigarette of the day, and read my daily two pages of *The Mill on the Floss*. As a test of determination, I am determined to finish that damn book if it kills me. At present I have reached page 171.

I had finished the cigarette and the two pages, and then crossed the hall to the drawing room where I worked the crossword puzzle in yesterday's newspaper and kept one eye on the grandfather clock, waiting for 9:30 and time for my second cigarette.

At the half-hour chime, I reached for my cigarette case and realized that I must have left it back in the library. I found the cigarette case on the table beside the easy chair I'd occupied earlier. When I opened the case, I discovered that instead of nineteen cigarettes waiting to be smoked, there were now only fifteen.

My first thought had been of Edwards. Had he taken the cigarettes? But then I remembered that Edwards did not smoke.

What about Henrietta and Cyrus? No, immediately after breakfast, they had driven off together in Cyrus's car to see that attorney in Chicago again about breaking the will.

Except for Edwards, I was the only other person in this huge house at the moment.

I rubbed my jaw.

While I had been seated in the drawing room occupied with the crossword puzzle, I had been facing the open doorway. I had had a clear view of the closed library door across the hall. I was positive that if anyone had entered the library, the movement would have caught my eye. But there had been none.

Was it possible that someone had entered the library through one of the windows and stolen my cigarettes?

Absurd as the sole motive for breaking and entering, of course; however, taking the cigarettes might simply have been a reflex action on the part of the burglar who had larger things on his mind.

I examined the high windows bordering the north and west sides of the room. Every one of them was securely bolted from the inside.

On the other hand, had one of them been open, and had the burglar bolted it *after* him when he entered the room?

In that case, he must still be in this very room, since I would surely have noticed if he had left the library.

I experienced a sense of proprietary outrage, even though I had

been a resident of O'Reilly Oaks no more than two weeks.

I armed myself with one of the fireplace poker and proceeded to search the large room.

I found no one.

I lit my 9:30 cigarette.

The thief had to be Edwards. He was the only other person in this house. A true burglar would have pocketed the entire case. But only four cigarettes were missing, very likely because Edwards did not believe that I would notice their disappearance.

Was Edwards one of those souls who convince themselves that they are not really smokers if they do not actually buy their cigarettes? Begging or stealing was another matter.

The loss of the cigarettes in themselves was trivial. What intrigued me was how Edwards got into the library without my seeing him and how he managed to leave.

I could think of only one possibility. Ridiculously gothic, and yet in these old houses.

I went about the room pressing knobs, protuberances, and carved wooden grapes in search of the device which activated the secret passageway that must be the answer to the mystery.

I had no success.

I pulled the bell rope vigorously.

When Edwards entered the library—by legitimate means—I said, "Edwards, I understand that you do not smoke."

"That's true, sir."

Edwards was tall, in his fifties, and he had served in this house all his life, as had his father and his grandfather.

"Edwards," I said, "has this house ever had any ghosts wandering about the corridors at night? Or possibly even during the day?"

His eyes flickered. "What kind of ghosts, sir?"

"The usual kind," I said. "Headless ghosts; wailing ghosts, ghosts rattling chains, ghosts who smoke cigarettes?"

He thought about that. "In a house this size and age, sir, every creak of a floorboard can rouse the imagination. But I assure you that there are no ghosts in this house." He cleared his throat. "Have you heard. . . or seen. . . anything, sir?"

I smiled enigmatically. "How old is this house?"

"General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly declared it complete in 1842, sir."

"When General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly built this place, did he whimsically include a few secret passages? I understand such things were popular at the time."

Edwards shifted slightly. "I wouldn't know, sir."

It appeared that further questioning on the existence of the secret passageway—at this time, at least—would be futile. And in the matter of the disappearing cigarettes, I decided that a warning—of sorts—might be sufficient.

I elaborately studied the contents of my cigarette case. "Hm. I could have sworn that I smoked only two cigarettes so far today. And yet now I have only fourteen left. From now on I intend to keep an exact count of my cigarettes, Edwards. I am trying to give up smoking, you know, and I'm rationing myself to exactly twenty cigarettes a day."

"Yes, sir," Edwards said. "I believe I did hear you mention something to that effect several days ago."

O'Reilly Oaks consists of some forty-five rooms, give or take a few. The present acreage of the estate is one hundred and eighty, most of which is either wooded or rented to neighboring farmers. Only the four or five acres immediately about the house are landscaped.

General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly, tavern keeper and victualer to the army, attained his rank when he raised a battalion of militia during the Black Hawk War. In the course of the campaign, his unit lost over three hundred men—two hundred of them through desertion, one hundred by way of various fevers, and eight through acute alcoholism. No Indian was ever sighted.

Returning from the war a somewhat richer man, General O'Reilly selected this site some fifteen miles from the town of Green River Falls, which in those days had a population of some three thousand souls. Today the population is still under four thousand.

In the days when servants were plentiful and cheap, a veritable army of them attended O'Reilly Oaks. But time, the rising cost of labor, and attrition on the O'Reilly capital took its toll, so that at the death, earlier this year, of Terrence O'Reilly—General O'Reilly's great-great-grandson, the only occupants of the house were Terrence himself and his man of all parts, Edwards.

When Terrence expired, only three direct, though remote, descendants of General O'Reilly still remained in this world—Cyrus O'Reilly, a Certified Public Accountant in Chicago; Henrietta O'Reilly, who

presided over a pool of typists at a mail-order firm in Boston; and myself, Wilbur O'Reilly, who am employed by the Gailliard Steamship Lines, which is based in San Francisco.

None of the three of us had ever met before and we were only vaguely aware of each other's existence. We gathered in the library at O'Reilly Oaks where Amos Keller, attorney and executor of Terrence O'Reilly's estate, read us the will.

It provided that O'Reilly Oaks remain in a trust under Keller's supervision. Any direct descendent of General O'Reilly was welcome to use the house and grounds for his home as long as he wished. The trust also established a fund to cover the real estate taxes and minimal maintenance of the building and grounds.

It further provided that Edwards had the right to remain at O'Reilly Oaks for as long as he chose and that he be paid his regularly monthly salary for as long as he lived there.

At the death of the last O'Reilly, the entire estate was to be liquidated and the money realized be distributed to a number of charities.

When Keller finished reading, there was a long minute of silence.

Henrietta, a robust grim-visaged woman, spoke up first. "Let me get this straight. You mean to say that none of us gets a piece of the estate?"

"I'm afraid not," Keller said. "Though, as mentioned, any or all of you may regard O'Reilly Oaks as your home for as long as you live. I am authorized to provide each of you with a monthly allotment to cover food, clothing, and incidentals."

Cyrus O'Reilly was a small man, balding, and wore rimless glasses. "In terms of cash, how much is the estate worth?"

Keller shrugged. "That is difficult to say. There are so many variables. It all depends upon the buyer, the market, the time, and so forth."

"Has it ever been put up for sale?" Cyrus asked.

"No."

"No offer was ever made?"

"Well, yes," Keller admitted. "A group of businessmen did approach Terrence some years ago. They made him a rather handsome offer, but he turned them down."

Cyrus pursued the point. "Why would a group of businessmen want O'Reilly Oaks? I'd think that in this day and age, a house this size

would be a drug on the market."

"Possibly," Heller said. "But they intended to turn the estate into a golf course. They seemed to believe that the main building would make an ideal clubhouse."

"How much did they offer?" Henrietta asked.

"I don't know exactly," Keller said. "But I understand it was in the neighborhood of a million." He looked over his glasses. "Do any of you intend making O'Reilly Oaks your home?"

Cyrus studied his fingernails. "I think I'll give it a try."

I smiled. "Frankly, it sounds ideal to me."

The three of us—Henrietta, Cyrus, and I—spent the next few days wandering independently about the house and grounds, assessing the situation.

I found the building quite to my taste. The furniture was a bit dated, but in excellent condition, though a bit dusty on the second and third floors. I selected a second-floor suite which caught the morning sun, did a bit of tidying, and moved in.

At breakfast at the end of the week, Henrietta surveyed the old-fashioned room without approval. "I'd prefer a smaller, newer place. Especially one that I could call my own."

Cyrus crunched into his toast. "I have an office and a clientele in Chicago. I don't see how I can seriously consider giving that up for subsistence living."

Edwards had done the cooking and now served.

"Edwards," I said, "the scrambled eggs were delicious. Did I detect paprika?"

"Yes, sir. Mild paprika for interesting color and vitamin C."

"What about you, Wilbur?" Cyrus demanded. "I understand that you have a responsible position for some steamship line. Do you intend to give that up for free room and board?"

I sipped coffee. "I have enough time in with my company to qualify for a half-pay pension. I believe the time has come for me to retire."

After my graduation from college some twenty years ago, I went to sea. Not out of a spirit of adventure, but for the solid economic reason that it was the only job I could find at the time.

I signed on as an assistant to the purser of the *Polylandia* of the Gail-liard Line. The *Polylandia*, a new luxury liner based at San Francisco, made most of the ports of the Far East. As of my present leave, I had

spent all of my working life on the *Polylandia* in the purser's department.

Henrietta put down her knife and fork. "I'm positive we can break the will."

"Oh?" I said. "On what grounds?"

"I found out that Terrence lived here for the last fifteen years as a recluse and everybody knows that recluses aren't normal. He couldn't have been in his right mind when he made out that will. We three are the only blood relatives he had in the world and by all rights we should inherit what he left and split it three ways."

Cyrus concurred emphatically. "We simply can't waste our lives sitting here in this monstrous house. There's a lawyer I know in Chicago who specializes in this type of thing. Will-breaking, you know. He's expensive, but we'll split his fee among the three of us and still have plenty left."

I declined to join them. "Personally, I prefer the situation just as it is. I am by nature sedentary. In my entire service on the *Polylandia*, I went ashore less than a dozen times and then only for souvenir shopping. I even had my appendix removed while aboard the *Polylandia*."

Cyrus crumpled his napkin. "Well, I'm driving to Chicago to see that lawyer. If either of you want to come along, I've got room in my car."

When Cyrus left, Henrietta rode beside him.

I spent the morning evaluating the kitchen-garden area and the greenhouse. The latter had a few broken panes but otherwise seemed in serviceable condition.

I returned to the house and found Edwards in the kitchen preparing lunch. "Edwards," I said, "do we have anything like a Rototiller on the premises?"

"Yes, sir. All of the gardening machinery and implements are in the shed next to the greenhouse. Do you intend to garden?"

"Yes. For twenty years I have been priming myself with garden magazines. It is now time to give it all a practical try."

Edwards trimmed some scallions. "The late Terrence O'Reilly was quite a gardener himself. He leaned towards vegetables on the premise that if you couldn't eat it, it wasn't worth growing, though he did have a soft spot for iris, moss rose, and heart's ease."

"I am rather inclined that way myself," I said. "I understand that

Uncle Terrence was a recluse."

"Not precisely, sir. He did prefer his own company, but he left the grounds now and then, principally for the monthly meeting of the Green River Falls Garden Club. Local gardeners get together on the second Wednesday of every month at the public library and I understand that new members are welcome."

"I never met Uncle Terrence in the flesh," I said, "though I do vaguely remember sending him some duty Christmas cards as a boy. He never married, did he?"

"He did, sir. Mrs. O'Reilly died thirty years ago."

"They had no children?"

"They had a son, sir. Robert."

"Dead, I suppose—or else Terrence would probably have left him the estate."

"Yes, sir. Dead. These last fifteen years."

"Then he died fairly young? An accident?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose you could call it that."

"Edwards," I said, "I have the distinct suspicion that there is a family skeleton involved here. What about Robert?"

"He was killed when his automobile plunged through a bridge railing and into the Mississippi River."

"Speeding? A few drinks under his belt?"

"No liquor was involved, sir. But he was speeding."

"Edwards," I said, "I am still pulling teeth. Why was he speeding?"

"Well, sir, he was speeding because the police were pursuing him. He had just escaped from the state prison."

"Why was he in prison?"

Edwards sighed. "Robert was a quiet sort of person, but with a strong sense of justice. A straight A student at the university. Or nearly so. In the final semester of his senior year, he received a B in ethics instead of the A he felt he honestly deserved. He lost his head and shot his professor."

I felt a twinge of sympathy. The only blot on my own academic career had been a C in physical education, a subject which has no place in a true university.

Edwards sliced tomatoes. "Robert was sentenced to life imprisonment, but he tired of life in confinement and managed to escape. For a short while, anyway."

"And now he is dead and buried?"

"Not exactly, sir. Dead, yes. But his body was never recovered from the river."

Henrietta and Cyrus returned in time for dinner that evening.

Cyrus rubbed his hands. "Well, Wilbur, we've seen McCardle. He's the lawyer I told you about. He's positive that we can break the will. He suggests that we do a bit of research and gather evidence about Uncle Terrence. When a man is a recluse for fifteen years, he's bound to develop a few idiosyncracies—items which, with the proper handling, we can build into a strong case showing that Uncle Terrence's mind wasn't exactly what it should have been."

He turned to Edwards, who was serving dessert. "Edwards, you were with Uncle Terrence all your life, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you must remember certain incidents, certain circumstances, when you might have called his behavior a little peculiar?"

"No, sir. I do not."

Cyrus smiled thinly. "You have a bad memory—is that it?"

"No, sir," Edwards said, "I have a very good memory." He left the room with the empty tray.

"That was clumsy of you, Cyrus," Henrietta said. "After all, Edwards stands to lose something when we break the will. If we want his cooperation, we will probably have to make some kind of a deal with him."

Cyrus nodded. "Well, Wilbur, are you with us?"

"How much does McCardle expect for his legal services?" I asked.

"Twenty-five percent of the estate," Cyrus said.

I smiled. "So each of us, including our attorney, would get one-fourth of what might or might not amount to a million dollars? Minus, of course, whatever it takes to get Edwards to cooperate and minus the inheritance taxes, which I understand are horrendous these days?" I shook my head. "No, I don't consider it at all worth contesting the will. Suppose I did manage to clear one hundred and fifty thousand? If I chose to spend it gloriously, it would be gone before very long and I would be left with nothing. Or even if I invested it wisely, how much could I expect as a return? Twelve thousand a year?" I helped myself to another slice of cottage cheese torte. "No, at this moment I am living in greater comfort and security than I could possibly expect with

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one hundred and fifty thousand. I am well fed, live in ease, get to pull the bell rope when so inclined, and how could I possibly afford a servant and superb cook such as Edwards on twelve thousand dollars a year?"

"I'd prefer one hundred and fifty thousand in cold hard cash," Henrietta said firmly.

Cyrus nodded. "The hell with security."

During the next week—interspersed with unsuccessful efforts to get Edwards to cooperate with them—Henrietta and Cyrus traveled to Chicago twice more for conferences with the lawyer.

On the evening of the day Edwards had filched my cigarettes, I sought him out. "Does that station wagon in the garage belong to you or was it Uncle Terrence's?"

"It was your uncle's, sir."

"I don't suppose there would be any objection if I borrow the wagon tonight. This is the second Wednesday of the month, isn't it? I thought I'd drop in at the garden club meeting."

"I'm certain you will enjoy it, sir. Your uncle did." He found the keys to the station wagon and handed them to me.

When I returned from Green River Falls that night after ten o'clock, I found flashing red lights and several State Patrol cars parked in the driveway in front of O'Reilly Oaks.

When I entered the house, a solid, uniformed man appeared in the hallway. "Mr. Wilbur O'Reilly?"

"Yes. What is this all about?"

"I am Lieutenant Stafford," he said. "State Patrol. I would like to ask you a few questions."

We joined Henrietta and Edwards in the drawing room.

Stafford studied me. "Your cousin Cyrus O'Reilly was found shot to death beside the road to Green River Falls about a half mile from here. Can you account for your time this evening?"

"Of course," I said. "I attended a meeting of the Green River Falls Garden Club. The subject was roses. Now what is this again about Cyrus?"

"His body was discovered in front of his automobile parked on the shoulder of the road at approximately eight-thirty this evening. We are fairly certain that he must have been killed within minutes of that time

because the road is well traveled and his body lay in the beam of his headlights."

I rubbed my chin. "Cyrus probably made the mistake of picking up a hitchhiker."

"Possibly," Stafford said. "However, in cases like this hitchhikers almost invariably take the car along with them. Also Cyrus O'Reilly's wallet was intact in his pocket and contained several hundred dollars. I doubt that any hitchhiker-murderer would have overlooked something like that."

"Undoubtedly the hitchhiker panicked and fled after the murder," I said. "What was Cyrus doing out this evening anyway?"

"No one seems to know," Stafford said. "He left without telling anyone and no one saw him leave. What time did you leave here this evening?"

"About seven-thirty."

"How many people were at this garden club meeting?"

"About twenty-five, possibly thirty. The meeting broke up at about a quarter to ten."

"These people would be able to verify that you were there the entire evening?"

"I was a stranger there. It was my first meeting. Probably no one even noticed me except the secretary when I signed up as a new member at the end of the meeting."

Stafford shook his head. "When you are a stranger in a small town, everybody notices you. So you were there from the time the meeting started until nearly ten?"

I coughed. "Well, . . . actually I arrived at the meeting a bit late."

"How late?"

I smiled quickly. "There seems to be a fork in the road to Green River Falls and I took the wrong turn. I traveled some distance before I realized that I was on the wrong road and turned back. I arrived at the Green River Falls library at about nine."

Henrietta smiled.

I glared at her. "And where were you at the time Cyrus met his death?"

"In my bedroom reading a book."

"Ha," I said. "And is there anyone who can verify that?"

"Of course not," she said coldly.

"And you, Edwards," I said. "Where were you at eight-thirty?"

He seemed surprised at the question. "I was in the kitchen preparing marinade for sauerbraten."

Stafford's eyes went to Henrietta and me. "I understand that the two of you and Cyrus O'Reilly inherited Terrence O'Reilly's estate. Is the probate complete? What I means is, will the estate now be divided between the two of you instead of three?"

"I'm afraid your information about the estate is wrong," I said. "We did not inherit Terrence O'Reilly's estate. According to the terms of the will, we are merely allowed to remain here as guests for as long as we choose. We do not ourselves own one inch of the property."

Henrietta hastily backed me up. "Not one inch. So you see, officer, there isn't any possible reason in the world why either one of us might have wanted Cyrus dead. We have absolutely nothing to gain by his death."

"Lieutenant," I said, "I believe that there is a nitrate test or something of that nature for detecting gun-powder grains on the hands of persons who have recently fired guns? That ought to settle this matter once and for all."

Stafford nodded. "Our technician is waiting in the next room. But murderers are getting more sophisticated these days. Especially where premeditation might be involved. They usually take precautions like wearing gloves or some type of wrapper around their hands and arms when they fire a gun. I won't be surprised if I don't find a thing."

He didn't.

Stafford continued to question Henrietta, Edwards, and me until eleven-thirty before giving up for the evening.

The next morning I met Henrietta at breakfast. "Well, Wilbur, now that Cyrus isn't with us any more, we stand to get larger shares of the estate, don't we?" she asked, pouring coffee.

"Henrietta, I still haven't the slightest intention of contesting the will."

She smiled thinly. "Of course not, Wilbur. And neither have I. At least not right now. We'll wait a while, won't we? Six months? A year? After all, even though the police apparently can't prove a thing about Cyrus's death, it isn't wise to appear so greedy." The smile disappeared. "It's got to be either you or me, and it certainly isn't me."

"What isn't you?"

"You understand perfectly well what I mean, Wilbur. One of us murdered Cyrus and I know it isn't me. You're a lot deeper and cleverer than I thought. That innocent expression doesn't fool me for a moment. I intend to keep an eye on you and I shall take precautions."

"Precautions? What precautions?"

"I shall send a sealed letter to a friend of mine with instructions that it is not to be opened unless I meet death under mysterious circumstances."

"Henrietta, I simply don't follow you."

She smiled grimly. "In my letter, I shall accuse you of murdering Cyrus."

I stared at her coldly. "You have absolutely no proof."

"Of course I haven't. If I had, I would most certainly have turned it over to the police. However, in my letter I shall say that both you and I conspired to murder Cyrus for bigger shares in the estate, and that now I suspect that you have plans to kill me too and take over everything. I think that would make the police sit up and take notice if something should happen to me, don't you, Wilbur? The confession of one of two conspirators would make quite a bit of trouble for you."

"Henrietta," I said, "has it ever occurred to you that there is a third person in this house who might want to see Cyrus dead?"

"Edwards?"

"Of course. After all, if you and Cyrus had broken the will, he would stand to lose his home and job."

"But we offered to cut him in."

"Yes, but your offer may not have been enough. Or he may prefer the status quo. He might regard O'Reilly Oaks as his home as much as Terrence O'Reilly did—certainly more than you or I do."

I finished my coffee. "I am now going to send a sealed letter to a friend in which I state flatly that the three of us—Edwards, you, and I—conspired to murder Cyrus for fun and profit and that I now strongly suspect that the two of you are about to murder me too." I smiled. "I will also state that you and Edwards have been having an outrageously erotic love affair."

She flushed. "Me? With a servant?"

"My dear Henrietta," I said. "It's been done before."

As it turned out, neither of us ever sent those letters.

I went to the library, lit my first cigarette of the day, and picked up *The Mill on the Floss*.

When I dispatched the obligatory two pages, I searched for yesterday's newspaper and the crossword puzzle.

Where had I left the paper? Oh, yes—in the sunny alcove at the first-floor landing.

I left the room, found the newspaper, and paused there to read an article I'd missed yesterday. When I finished, I went back down the stairs to the library.

I had finished approximately half the crossword puzzle when the grandfather clock across the hall chimed the half hour.

Time for my second cigarette. I reached for my case on the table beside me and opened it.

Five of my cigarettes were missing. When I had left the room I had not taken the case with me and evidently while I was gone. . .

I went to the bell rope and pulled vigorously.

Edwards appeared. "Yes, sir?"

"Edwards," I said, "I am missing five cigarettes."

He frowned thoughtfully.

"Edwards," I said. "Do you agree that there are only three people in this house?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Good. I know positively that I did not smoke those five cigarettes, and I also know that the very odor of tobacco makes Henrietta ill. What does that leave us with, Edwards?"

He evaded my eyes. "I don't know, sir."

"It leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the person who stole those cigarettes is you, Edwards."

Edwards rubbed his neck. "Yes, sir. I confess. I took the cigarettes."

I regarded him sternly. "Edwards, aren't you ashamed of yourself? After all, your salary is quite generous. I should think that you would be able to buy your cigarettes, it shouldn't be necessary to steal them. Do you have an explanation?"

He hung his head. "Sir, when I stopped smoking, I swore never to buy another cigarette. However. . ."

"Ah," I said. "You left yourself a loophole. You did not forswear to beg or steal cigarettes, did you?"

He looked away. "I think steal is too harsh a word, sir. Filch,

perhaps. . ."

"Edwards," I said; "above and beyond the filching, there is one other thing about the incident which bothers me. How the devil did you get into the library? There must be some secret passage. When I left this room, I walked up to the alcove at the first landing to retrieve the paper. I was up there for perhaps two or three minutes, reading, but I faced the open library door down below me. While I did not actually stare at it, it was within the periphery of my attention. I am certain that I would have caught the movement of anyone entering the library."

Edwards chewed his lips for a moment. "As you went up the stairs to the landing, sir, your back was toward the library door. I took that moment to slip into the library."

"Very well," I said. "Then how did you get out of the library? You surely wouldn't have had enough time to enter it, steal the cigarettes, and leave during the relatively short time my back was turned."

Edwards rubbed his jaw. "I hid behind the door, sir. As you re-entered the library and walked toward your chair, your back was again turned. I darted out of the door."

I sighed. "Then there is no secret passage?"

"No, sir. No secret passage."

"Edwards," I said, "I admire your timing, but this filching of cigarettes has got to stop."

"Yes, sir," Edwards said firmly. "I'll see that it doesn't happen again."

The weeks passed rather quietly and the second Wednesday of another month appeared.

I borrowed the keys to the station wagon from Edwards.

"The garden club again, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "This month we have a vegetable gardener as guest speaker. Hungarian wax peppers are his specialty."

"I'm certain it will be interesting, sir. I do hope you don't take the wrong fork in the road again, sir."

"Not very likely. I know my way around by now."

At slightly after nine o'clock that evening, as I sat in the audience in the lecture room of the Green River Falls library, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

It was Lieutenant Stafford of the State Patrol accompanied by another uniformed officer. Stafford beckoned and I followed him outside, acutely aware that I was the cynosure of all eyes.

On the steps outside the building, he said, "Were you in there all this evening?"

"Since eight o'clock. Why?"

"Would the people in there be willing to swear that you were?"

"You'll have to ask them. But I assure you that I did not leave the room. As a matter of fact, I occupied the seat next to the mayor. His field is geraniums. Frankly, I've never cared about geraniums. All the ones I've seen appear to be perpetually dusty. What is this all about?"

"Your cousin Henrietta was found shot to death beside her car on the road to Green River Falls by a passing motorist at eight-thirty."

I frowned. "Henrietta shot beside the road? The same as Cyrus?"

He nodded. "Same road, same place, same time. Probably the same gun. We'll establish that later. Now let's go back inside."

I balked. "You mean you're going back in there and break up the meeting just to ask if anybody remembers me?"

"Exactly."

We marched back inside, where Lieutenant Stafford mounted the podium and took command of the meeting.

It was most embarrassing, but he found a number of people, including the mayor, who were willing to swear that I had been in my seat in the audience when the meeting began at eight and had not left it until called outside by Stafford. I had the feeling that my new notoriety would either get me expelled from the club or nominated for its presidency at the next election.

Stafford took me to State Patrol headquarters, where I was given another nitrate test, which, of course, proved to be negative.

Nevertheless, I was then taken into a small interrogation room for further questioning.

"Frankly," I said, "outside of some psycho lurking beside the roadway and killing without reason, I think your only bet as the killer is Edwards."

"Edwards? That butler, or whatever?"

"Why not?" I said. "Where was he at the time Henrietta was murdered?"

"In the kitchen grinding dry bread for wiener schnitzel."

Weiner schnitzel? I considered that tenderly. Usually it also meant cucumber slices in thick cream.

"What possible reason would Edwards have to kill your cousins?" Stafford asked.

"They were planning to break Uncle Terrence's will and convert the estate into cash. Without my cooperation, I assure you. Nevertheless, if they had succeeded, it would have meant that Edwards would lose his job and domicile."

"You think he'd kill two people just to keep his job?"

"If one also considers room and board, I would say that we are talking about a package deal which exceeds fifteen thousand dollars a year. Giving Edwards a conservative additional twenty years of life, that could amount to something over three hundred thousand dollars. Surely something worth killing for."

Stafford did not seem impressed with a motive stretching over twenty years. He regarded me thoughtfully. "Now that your cousins are dead, that leaves only you. The last of the O'Reillys. Is that the way you planned it all along? Eliminate them first and then step up and break the will? There's no point in dividing the spoils three ways if you can hog it all."

I shed the accusation with dignity. "I have a perfect alibi."

He grunted. "I always distrust perfect alibis and I always break them. Do you have a twin brother by any chance?"

I smiled. "I am one of a kind. I would not have it any other way."

It was after midnight before Stafford released me and had me driven back to my car.

In the station wagon, I hesitated.

I most certainly did not murder either Cyrus or Henrietta, though, frankly, I did not mourn their passing.

But that left only Edwards. He had to be the murderer. After all, who else was there? I did not really put much stock in the roadside-psychotic theory.

But if Edwards was the murderer, was it safe for me to return to O'Reilly Oaks?

I pondered that.

Edwards had killed Henrietta and Cyrus because they were intent on breaking the will. But I had no such intention. Besides, I was, after all, the last of the O'Reillys. If anything happened to me, the estate

would be liquidated, leaving Edwards homeless and without a job.

No, it might be a bit sticky living in the same house with a murderer, but my life was his life. If he harmed me, he would be cutting his own throat, so to speak. I should be perfectly safe at O'Reilly Oaks.

In time Stafford would undoubtedly gather enough evidence to arrest Edwards, but until then there was no point in my moving to some wretched motel. I drove back to O'Reilly Oaks and had a good night's sleep.

In the morning, after showering and dressing, I went to the bureau drawer where I kept my cigarettes.

I frowned as I looked down at the opened carton. I had purchased it yesterday and removed one pack. There should now be nine packs left. But there were only six.

Damn Edwards. First four cigarettes. Then five. And now three whole packs. And after he had firmly promised that he would stop. . .

I stared down at the cigarettes for perhaps a full minute.

Of course, I thought. Of course. That would explain everything. I filled my case and went downstairs.

I waited in the breakfast room until Edwards appeared.

"Edwards," I said, "I have been putting two and two together. Rationally it would appear that we two are the only people in the world who have motives for the deaths of both Henrietta and Cyrus."

"It appears so, sir."

"However, Edwards, I know that I did not kill either Henrietta or Cyrus. And I have the strange suspicion that neither did you. And neither, Edwards, do I now believe that you stole those cigarettes. Any of them."

Edwards coughed slightly.

I smiled. "I put this to you, Edwards. When Robert O'Reilly's automobile plunged over that Mississippi River bridge, he did not drown, but managed to crawl out of the water and make his way back home. And once here, he concealed himself somewhere in this house and has been hiding here ever since."

Edwards avoided my eyes.

"Edwards," I said, "he must have needed the assistance and connivance of another party or parties to survive here. After all, he had to be provided with food, drink, and whatever." I smiled again. "Edwards, why don't you just supply him with cigarettes too? Why does he

find it necessary to steal them?"

Edwards sighed heavily. "Actually Robert was a nonsmoker until recently. But he has begun to acquire the habit."

I helped myself to the platter of browned sausages and delicately fried potatoes. "I assume that Robert killed Cyrus and Henrietta because if they had managed to break the will, he would have lost his sanctuary?"

"Yes, sir. The house would have been sold and the new owner would in time have become aware of Robert's existence. So Robert forced both of your cousins to drive to the spot where their bodies were found, shot them, and then walked back across the fields to the house."

Edwards poured coffee into my cup. "What do you intend to do now, sir?"

"I will have to inform the police, of course, and have them root out Robert."

"Sir, do you enjoy living in this house?"

"Certainly."

"Sir, Robert O'Reilly is the son of Terrence O'Reilly. As such, he has a perfectly legitimate and primary claim to his father's estate. He could go to court and easily break the will and its provisions for your occupancy here."

"But Robert is a murderer and a murderer cannot legally profit from his murders."

"True, sir. But Robert did not murder his father, and the date of his father's natural death is the point from which he would lay claim to the estate. As for your cousins, they did not own any part of the estate nor have a natural claim to it greater than Robert's. In other words, he may have murdered them, but it was not to gain control of the estate. He felt he already had that legally, whenever he chose to make himself known."

Edwards returned the coffeepot to its trivet. "Besides, sir, are you quite positive that the police could successfully prove that Robert murdered your cousins?"

"Well, . . . no. But still, Robert is an acknowledged murderer. There is that matter of the ethics professor. Shouldn't he be returned to prison for that?"

"Possibly, sir. However, if you were responsible for sending him

back, he might be inclined to a bit of vindictiveness and pursue his claim to the estate. He might be a felon, sir, but he would become a rich felon and your landlord. Undoubtedly he would evict you and perhaps even charge you room and board for the time you have spent here."

I sipped my coffee slowly while Edwards waited.

"Edwards," I said, "suppose Robert takes it into his head to murder me too?"

"Sir," Edwards said earnestly, "when the last O'Reilly dies—which for all practical purposes means you—the estate will be liquidated. Robert might forestall that by emerging from his hiding place and laying claim to the estate, but that would mean he would be sent back to prison. That is the very last thing in the world he wants. He would not dream of harming you, sir. I'm sure he wishes you a long life."

I sighed. "Edwards, there is a secret passage into the library, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir. From inside the library it is revealed by pressing the posterior of the cherub blowing the trumpet on the wainscoting to the right of the fireplace."

"And the passage leads to where?"

"A bedroom on the third floor."

"Is that where Robert keeps himself?"

"No, sir. His quarters are behind false walls."

I quickly held up a hand. "Never mind. The less I know about his exact whereabouts, the better. And, Edwards, perhaps it might also be wiser if Robert did not know that I am aware of his existence."

"I understand, sir."

After breakfast, I retired to the library. I lit a cigarette and picked up *The Mill on the Floss*.

Was Robert watching me at this very moment? There obviously had to be some type of peephole. Was he waiting for me to leave my cigarette case behind again? But why should he? After all, he had those three packs he'd taken from my bureau drawer. At this moment he was more than likely in his hiding place contentedly puffing tobacco.

I put down the book, rose, and examined the wainscoting. I found the cherub with the worn posterior.

Gingerly I pressed it.

The wainscoting slid noiselessly back, revealing an opening some-

what narrower and-shorter than a normal doorway.

I hesitated at the darkness within, but then pulled out my cigarette lighter. Using its flickering light, I stepped cautiously into the opening.

I noticed a small knob just inside. Evidently it opened and closed the passage from the inside.

I left the passage door open and slowly made my way up the narrow stone stairs. There was the smell of dampness and mold, but there were no cobwebs. After all, they couldn't exist long if Robert kept tramping up and down all the time.

I ascended past what I estimated to be the second floor and continued upward until I faced a blank wooden wall.

I found a small knob similar to the one downstairs and turned it until the panel in front of me slid to one side. Whatever one could say about Robert, he certainly kept the mechanism of these doors well oiled.

I entered a small bedroom stale with the smell of disuse. Very likely long ago it had been occupied by one of the maids.

Footmarks, grimed from the passageway, faded to the hallway door.

In the hall they seemed to disappear entirely—however, when I got down on my hands and knees I could just barely make them out again. I trailed them to a doorway down the hall.

Was this Robert's hiding place? Not exactly, I supposed. Edwards had mentioned that Robert's haven was concealed behind a false wall, though probably this door was one way of getting to that false wall.

I hesitated between caution and curiosity and then edged the door open slightly. The medium-sized room appeared to be well lighted and it was empty of human life.

I stepped quietly inside and glanced about.

Where might this walled-off compartment be? Not that I had any intention of disturbing Robert. I simply wanted to know where it could be found.

Certainly not on the east and north sides of the room. They were thoroughly windowed. And not the south either. That bordered the corridor.

I studied the plastered west wall. There had to be some indication of the secret entrance, but there seemed to be none. Not even a hairline crack.

I opened the doors of a free-standing wardrobe and found neatly hung clothes.

But of course! This must be Edwards' room. I had never been inside it before, but now I recognized some of his clothes.

I should have realized at once that this room was lived in. Not a mote of dust anywhere. A clean-smelling comfortable room that I myself might occupy, except that I would add ashtrays.

My eyes went to the wastebasket. It contained a discarded magazine and...

I peered closer and lifted the periodical.

There—amid various debris—lay three unopened packs of cigarettes. My brand.

I thoughtfully returned to the wardrobe and examined the soles of Edwards' shoes. Yes, one pair of them bore traces of the unmistakable grime of the secret passageway.

Discarded cigarettes? Grime on the bottoms of Edwards' shoes? A smooth plastered wall that showed absolutely no signs of any entrance to a hideaway. A *supposed* hideaway?

My mouth dropped.

I had been flimflammed. Yes, that was the only word for it. Flimflammed.

Robert was unequivocally dead. He died when his automobile went off that bridge—body recovered or not. He was not lurking in the walls of this house nor had he stolen a single one of my cigarettes.

Edwards had cleverly reanimated him solely for my benefit.

Why?

I saw it all now.

With the deaths of Henrietta and Cyrus, I became the sole surviving O'Reilly and, as such, had to be preserved.

I had declared that I had no intention of challenging Uncle Terrence's will, yet there ever remained the danger to Edwards that someday in the future I might change my mind. After all, a million-dollar estate could be a constant temptation, especially now that I would have to share it with no one.

No, Edwards had to meet that hanging threat by creating, or recreating, Robert.

If Robert existed—or at least, if I believed that he did—it was pointless for me to ever consider contesting the will. Robert had a prior claim and would step forward if I tried.

Yes, Edwards had been clever, but the charade was over with now

and I would tell him so. It would undoubtedly destroy his sense of security, but the truth must out.

I stalked downstairs and found Edwards in the kitchen doing the breakfast dishes.

He wiped his hands and turned. "Yes, sir?"

Edwards had been born in this house, as had his father, and his grandfather. He belonged here as much as any O'Reilly. He loved it, he served it, he killed to protect it.

I rubbed my jaw. He had also been so considerate as to commit the murders at a time when he thought I would have a perfect alibi—though, of course, he could not have anticipated that I would take the wrong turn in the road on the night Cyrus met his death.

Edwards waited.

I cleared my throat. "Edwards, about this business of Robert filching my cigarettes. Perhaps you'd better see to it that he is regularly supplied. At least a pack a day."

He nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. I'll put Robert's cigarettes on the master shopping list immediately."

The wiener schnitzel that evening was absolutely delicious.

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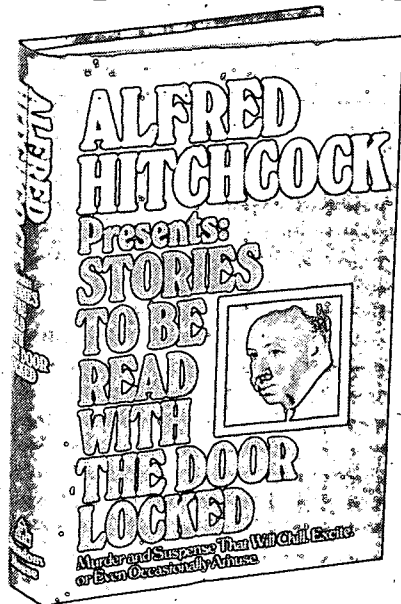
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